

# Video Watchdog<sup>®</sup>

the Perfectionist's  
Guide to  
Fantastic Video

No. 88  
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## HARRY POTTER

THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS!  
BONES! DAGON! GHOSTS OF MARS!

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the Perfectionist's  
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Fantastic Video

No. 88 / OCT 2002

"We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art."

—Henry James

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Filmmaker *Paul Talbot* returns to VW with a production history of Walt Disney's first excursion into "young adult horror," now available on DVD from Anchor Bay Entertainment! Read all about the Disney studio's struggle to regain an audience in the 1980s, and to find the right ending for their comeback feature! With comments from stars Bette Davis, Lynn-Holly Johnson, and director John Hough!

Front: Daniel Radcliffe exercises his special powers in **HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE** (2001), available from Warner Home Video.

Inside: Charlie Largent's digi-collage pays tribute to a moment of horror from the Nigel Kneale-scripted **THE WOMAN IN BLACK** (1989), available from BFS Entertainment.

Back: Vincent Price, in full regalia, at the keyboard of **THE ABOMINABLE DR. PHIBES** (1971)—reviewed in this issue by Joe Dante!—available from MGM Home Entertainment.

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# KENNEL

**ANTHONY AMBROGIO** doesn't know what he did to rate being included in the acknowledgements of *SPAWN OF SKULL ISLAND*, but he's happy to be in such prestigious company.

**JOHN CHARLES** reviews Asian DVD and VCD releases on his website, Hong Kong Digital ([www.dighkmovies.com](http://www.dighkmovies.com)).

**BILL COOKE** recently vacationed in Las Vegas and saw *STAR WARS EPISODE II: ATTACK OF THE CLONES* digitally projected. If this is the future of movie theater presentation, he'll be spending a lot more time at home.

**JOE DANTE** recorded audio commentaries for Warner Home Video's new DVDs of *GREMLINS*, *INNERSPACE* and *GREMLINS 2: THE NEW BATCH*.

**HARRY LONG**'s first published artwork appeared in the pages of *GORE CREATURES* and *PHOTON*. His writing also appears in *CLASSIC IMAGES*, *OUTRÉ* and *SCARLET STREET*.

**TIM LUCAS** is very close to finishing the Bava Bible. On the horizon: liner notes for DVD releases of *ROY COLT AND WINCHESTER JACK* and *A VIRGIN AMONG THE LIVING DEAD*.

**KIM NEWMAN** just recorded commentary tracks with Steve Jones for *HALLOWEEN II* and *HALLOWEEN III: SEASON OF THE WITCH*—these releases will be out in the US as part of an Anchor Bay box set and in the UK as individual releases.

**RICHARD HARLAND SMITH** recently spent two nights in NYC's meatpacking district acting opposite Victor Argo and others in the digital video film *22 SHORT SCENES ABOUT JELLY AND VIN*, directed by Betsy Foldes.

**PAUL TALBOT** is the producer/director of three direct-to-video releases: *CAMPFIRE TALES* (1991), *FREAKSHOW* (1995), and *HELLBLOCK 13* (1999). He covered *FLESH FOR FRANKENSTEIN* and *BLOOD FOR DRACULA* in our 28th issue.

**SAM & REBECCA UMLAND** are both on the faculty of the University of Nebraska at Kearney. Sam wrote the Cliff Notes for Ray Bradbury's *FAHRENHEIT 451*!

**DOUGLAS E. WINTER**'s *CLIVE BARKER, THE DARK FANTASTIC: THE AUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY* (Harper Collins, \$34.95) was called a "fan's dream of a book" by *BOOKLIST*.

## VW THANKS:

Anchor Bay Entertainment (Jay Douglas, Perry Martin, Maral Kaloustian/Sue Procko PR), BFS Entertainment (Ron Lehman), Juanita Bowman, Columbia TriStar Home Video (Fritz Friedman, John Singh), El/Retro-Seduction Cinema (Michael L. Raso), Facets Video (Ray Privett), Image Entertainment (Spencer Savage), Independent-International (Samuel M. Sherman), Sanney Leung, Luminary Press (Gary J. & Susan Svehla), Luminous Film & Video Wurks (Fred Frey), McFarland & Company, Sanctuary Visual Entertainment (Turath Al-Saraf, Andrew McIntosh), Sinister Cinema (Greg Luce), Something Weird Video (Mike Vraney, Lisa Petrucci), Tai Seng Video Marketing (Frank Djeng), Thunder's Mouth Press (Bianca Olivieri), Universal Studios Home Video (Maria La Magra), VCI Entertainment (Bob Blair, Beatriz Suarez), Xploited Cinema (Tony Simonelli), our subscribers, distributors, contributors, correspondents, and especially everyone who expressed their concern over Tim's recent operations! He's doing fine!

## PHOTO SOURCES:

Anchor Bay Entertainment (26-40), BFS Entertainment (inside, 52, 53), Columbia TriStar Home Video (60), Facets Video (15, 16), First Look Home Entertainment (12), GoodTimes Entertainment (17), HBO Video (51), Image Entertainment (58, 65), Laser Paradise (68, 70), Lions Gate Home Entertainment (11), New Line Entertainment (46, 47), Retro-Seduction Cinema/Independent-International (57), Samuel Z. Archive (21, 23, back), Sanctuary Visual Entertainment (4, 5), Sinister Cinema (9, 18), Something Weird Video (14), Tai Seng Video Marketing (8), Universal Studios Home Video (63), Alan Upchurch Collection (24), Warner Home Video (front, 42-45, 78), Douglas E. Winter Collection (77), X-Rated Cult DVD (72). **ARTWORK:** Charlie Largent (inside), Pete Fitzgerald (20). **LOGO & COVER FORMAT:** Radomir Perica (International Design Studio, Bethesda MD).

*Dedicated to the memory of Doris Wishman.*

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**VISIT THE VIDEO WATCHDOG WEBSITE: <http://www.videowatchdog.com>**



# THE WATCHDOG BARKS



**SOME VIDEO** equipment—we love it, we hate it, we can't live without it.

The flashpoint of this everlasting love/hate schism comes shortly after these beautiful toys first arrive, with the arduous process of installation. For some reason, in my household, though I'm the only one who knows how to operate the components of our entertainment center once they're hooked-up, Donna has always been more effective at the task of actually hooking them up. There are various right/left brain explanations for this, many of them probably as true as they are tragic, but it's those areas where she excels while I fail miserably that make us a good match.

To her family and close friends, Donna is also the equivalent of 911 when it comes to computer-related problems, and her facility with computers sometimes gives her insight into the quirks of other machinery. A case in point: we've been selling the Wild East DVD of **EUGENIE DE SADE** through VW, and one of the many readers who bought the disc from us called with a complaint. The disc played fine on his Apex DVD player, but it wouldn't play on his Panasonic. Did this reflect a fault with the disc?

Donna and I had been having a similar problem of our own, finding that the DVD-ROM drives on our computers—which we use to make the video grabs that illustrate many of our reviews and features—were becoming increasingly unpredictable. Sometimes our drives work fine; other times, we drop in disc after disc and they just sit and bump, refusing to budge. Donna's research into the matter revealed that some new discs are designed to make it harder for DVD players to get around region coding. In older discs, this encoding was used to confirm that the player was set to Region 1 before proceeding to "play." Now disc manufacturers have added something else to DVDs which "ask" the player which region code it previously played. If it doesn't get the answer it wants, the disc will stall and grind.

Purely by accident, Donna discovered a way around this problem. By popping in an endless series of discs in the hope that one would eventually play, she discovered that Criterion's **THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST** DVD had the code that our DVD-ROM drives seem to want. So, whenever

we have a problem getting a disc to play, we pop in **THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST** and let it perform its miracle, so to speak. We don't even have to play it, just wait for the menu to pop up, then eject it. Afterwards, our "troubled" discs seem to play just fine. Of course, it doesn't have to be **THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST**—any religious epic will do. (Just kidding.) Seriously, if you find yourself having a recurring problem of this nature, search your collection for that special disc that has a way of making your player more cooperative, and keep it handy. This advice also worked for the guy who bought **EUGENIE DE SADE** from us—his disc now plays fine on both his machines—so we thought we should pass the advice along to our readership at large, for what it's worth.

More recently, we've discovered that our DVD-ROM drives are showing a dislike for gold discs, which are becoming more and more common. Silver discs spin up right away, but not the gold. If anyone knows what this means, illuminate us.

I am probably preoccupied with video equipment this month because I can sense that, after ten years or more of perfect service, my Panasonic S-VHS player is about to give up the ghost. This means that I must brace myself for the future shock of a 21st Century VCR showroom, and decide which machine will assist me through the next ten years, on the basis of its brand name, bells and whistles.

Even more distressing is the likelihood that our household may soon be making the leap into widescreen projection TV. During a recent visit to a Circuit City store, I dragged Donna into the HDTV showroom, a mysterious Taj Mahal where she never lets me loiter for more than 30 seconds. This time, however, we both fell to our knees before a Sony 57" internal projection set. It really is much too big for our living room... but since Donna loves it too, we will probably spring for it. She is already taking measurements and drawing up maps to see how our turn-of-the-last-century house, whose "living room" is more akin to a "parlor," might best accommodate this magnificent monster. I foresee a morning of great suspense, an afternoon of incessant cursing, and an evening of transcendent elation—as I embark on watching again every single 16:9 DVD I own, as if for the first time.

..... **Tim Lucas**



## WATCHDOG NEWS

# Critical Visions of



## THE DEAD ZONE

Reported by Tim Lucas

### THE DEAD ZONE

1983, Sanctuary Visual Entertainment #SDE 3015, DD-5.1 & DD-2.0/MA/16:9/LB/+, £19.99, 103m 19s, DVD-0

**I**n the past, first on laserdisc and more recently on DVD, there have been many kinds of audio commentary: the production history commentary (innovated by Bruce Eder at Criterion), the director and star commentary, the scene specific commentary, the special effects commentary, the patchwork "all departments" commentary (T2,

MGM's "James Bond Collection"), the analytic commentary (Laura Mulvey on Criterion's **PEEPING TOM**), the Dadaist commentary (Michael Nesmith's **ELEPHANT PARTS**), even the nude commentary (there's one by Linnea Quigley on Sub Rosa's new DVD of Jess Franco's **MARI COOKIE AND THE KILLER TARANTULA**).

Now, in a daring move, Great Britain's Sanctuary Visual Entertainment has released a region-free disc of **THE DEAD ZONE**, David Cronenberg's film of Stephen King's 1979 novel, which pairs the movie with a no-holds-barred critical audio commentary

by Stephen Jones and Kim Newman (who reviewed the film for us in VW 72:54).

Authored at Phoenix Video Limited, the "Sanctuary Special Edition" disc looks and sounds comparable to Paramount's domestic issue, released a couple of years ago, and it marks the first time that the complete version (including the final "twitch" shot of the "scissors suicide" scene) has been released in the

*Christopher Walken inhabits a vision of a burning house in David Cronenberg's THE DEAD ZONE.*



UK. Like the US release, it offers a handsome and accurate 1.85:1 transfer, which can be heard in the original 2.0 stereo surround mix, or in a luxuriant 5.1 remix that is especially flattering to Michael Kamen's orchestral score and various dimensional sound effects. While Paramount's dual-layer release is alone in offering a French mono soundtrack, the 20 chaptered Sanctuary disc offers subtitles in English, French and Spanish and presents the film in 16:9 only; when played on an APEX region-free player, the image fills the entire TV screen with a squeezed image—actually, a bit too squeezed to make viewing a pleasure. Both discs include the original theatrical trailer (2m 4s), which contains some alternate takes, different musical accompaniment, and showcases the book jacket-like onscreen title of **STEPHEN KING THE DEAD ZONE**. The UK disc, with attractive animated menus and a plastic keepcase that hides the likeness of a "Stillson for Senator" button under the disc, was produced by Ken Barnes.

The audio commentary is a very chatty, giggly one, and Jones and Newman have no problem at all with finding something ebullient to say about just about everything in the movie. It's a unique track; there have been scholarly audio commentaries before (Roger Ebert's **DARK CITY** track is an outstanding example), but this is a critical one that (it seems to me, anyway) sometimes makes the mistake of overstepping irreverence into discourtesy. "Now *there's* a mark of quality," they laugh as Dino De Laurentiis' presentational credit appears, and after mentioning the premature death of screenwriter Jeffrey Boam in 2000, he is shrugged off as a competent, workmanlike screenwriter—"not an artist." (It's a rare screenwriter who is an artist, and a rarer one who doesn't have to become a director in order to get their art onto the screen.) Also ripe for ribbing along the way are Christian zealots, Canadians, North Americans (98% of us believe it's our God-given right to own at least 28 firearms, Newman jokes) and other groups, not least of all the

collected works of Stephen King. Sometimes the barbs are valid, in a satiric sense, but sometimes it gets the commentators into trouble as interpreters of the material. For example, during the early hospital scenes, fun is poked at the sparseness of Carol Spier's production design, which is discussed like a telltale trait of her work; in fact, Spier deliberately cut back on the set dressing in these early post-trauma scenes to underscore Johnny's (Christopher Walken's) awakening sense of loss. The sets seen later in the film, like Deputy Frank Dodd's bedroom, are cluttered with character, and much closer to Spier's natural design tendencies, but, by then, the commentators are on to another topic. Cronenberg regular Les Carlson is misidentified as Jack Creley, and Boam is taken to task for the clichéd writing of a newspaper office blackmail scene, which was in fact scripted by Cronenberg—as reported in my 1983 CINEFANTASTIQUE production article on the film, which was the source for much of Jones' behind-the-scenes trivia about the picture.

Nicholas Campbell demonstrates the twitch of the death nerve in a shot previously deleted from all British videos of **THE DEAD ZONE**.





Jones' and Newman's critical remarks about **THE DEAD ZONE** itself can be pretty scathing, but they tend to be dead on about its many problems. They point out the hapless ambiguity surrounding the exact cause and nature of John Smith's (Christopher Walken's) visions; Martin Sheen's odd choice of a boisterous Southern accent for the character of Greg Stillson, an evil politician running for senator in the state of Maine; the ugly gratuity of the nudity in a Castle Rock Killer murder scene, which they presume was included by De Laurentiis edict; and some cruelly amusing blind spots in the production, like the lack of even a single security cop at any of Stillson's political rallies, the fact that it's always winter regardless of how many weeks or years pass (the film was shot in Toronto), and the absence of even a single gawker in the background of the final scene, considering that an attempted assassination has just taken place. Despite all this, the critics speak respectfully of Cronenberg—apologizing for him, in effect, by describing **THE DEAD ZONE** as his first “job of work” film, undertaken as a kind of demonstration reel to the industry, to prove he was capable of doing more than his highly personal brand of horror films—and laying the blame for the movie at the feet of De Laurentiis, Boam, and Stephen King. As a novelist himself, Newman brings a thorough knowledge of King's published and filmed works to the table, teasing out thematic threads found in common with his other stories, comparing this adaptation to them, and to the original novel. Jones is more of an interpreter of the work at hand, insightfully noting that characters other than John sometimes make surprisingly prophetic statements, while

some other characters have their wishes fulfilled only to realize that they don't really want or need what's at the heart of their yearnings. Both make observant remarks about inconsistencies of character, particularly some subtle cruelties exercised by Sarah (Brooke Adams), though they often refer to Adams as a talented actress not given the professional breaks she deserved. By the end, Jones' and Newman's pros and cons about the movie are so unevenly stacked that, when they finally speak about it in summation with bright enthusiasm, citing it as one of Cronenberg's better films, you might fall out of your chair.


At one point in the commentary, Newman points out the episodic structure of the piece, comparing it to four episodes of an ongoing television series: *The Awakening*, *The Serial Killer*, *The Rich Man's Son*, *The Evil Politician*. Since this commentary was recorded, the USA Network has premiered **THE DEAD ZONE** as a weekly television series, starring Anthony Michael Hall as Johnny Smith. Also shot in Canada (Vancouver, BC), it is a well-made, occasionally engrossing program, one which immediately improved on the feature film by successfully staging the childhood hockey accident that was omitted from Cronenberg's version (reportedly because it did not test well with preview audiences), by intelligently compositing some characters, and by replacing Walken's numb-faced, bipolar interpretation with the warm and committed central performance of Hall. Cronenberg's film, moreso than King's novel, established the style and mainstays of the USA series, but in light of the advances and creative choices made by this latest adaptation, Cronenberg's **THE DEAD ZONE** now looks

dated, simplistic, and somewhat miscast. It would have been interesting to hear Jones and Newman wax on about this latest wrinkle in the unfolding of Stephen King's New England mythos.

An important extension of the audio commentary is a 24-page color booklet, included in the keepcase, which contains the **DEAD ZONE** chapter from Stephen Jones' book **CREEPSHOWS: THE ILLUSTRATED STEPHEN KING FILM GUIDE**, an international poster gallery, cast and crew bios, Jeffrey Boam's original script pages of the deleted prologue scene (important to anyone studying the film), Jones' brief overview “A World of New Flesh: The Film Career of David Cronenberg,” and a Cronenberg filmography, which confirms that the man who revolutionized cinematic horror in the 1970s and '80s has now acted in more features than he's written or directed.

Ironically, when recently interviewed for the cable program **THE DIRECTORS**, Cronenberg mentioned that he would go “quite far out of my way” to avoid reading another review of his work. Now he can listen to one. Sanctuary Visual Entertainment deserves applause for having the *cajones* to wed such a popular film to such a candid critical commentary; we'd like to see and hear more discs of its kind.

According to Newman, more are on the way soon. He and Jones have been booked to repeat their double-act on upcoming discs of **HALLOWEEN II** and **HALLOWEEN III: SEASON OF THE WITCH**, which will come out in the UK as separate releases and in the US as part of a **HALLOWEEN** series box set.

“I've been ordered not to be too irreverent about **HALLOWEEN II**,” Newman laughs. 



# VIDEO TAPEVINE

## *Ed Gein Keeps His Exquisite Cadaver Up!*

### A NOTE ON TIMINGS

The timings listed for the following tapes reflect only the length of the film itself, and do not include such ephemera as video company logos, FBI warnings, supplementary trailers, or MPAA ratings certificates. The only exceptions to this rule are those films in which the soundtrack is first heard while the distributor's logo is still onscreen.

### BULLETS OF LOVE

*Bat sei ching mai* (Cantonese)

*Bu si qing mi* (Mandarin)

"Undying Love Riddle"

2001, Tai Seng Video Marketing,  
HF/SS/LB, \$19.95, VHS

DD-5.1 & DD-2.0/DTS/MA/LB/ST/+,  
\$19.95, DVD-0, 102m 45s

In the aftermath of a rave club shootout, HK police officer Sam (**COMRADES: A LOVE STORY**'s Leon Lai Ming) apprehends vicious Taiwanese drug smuggler Night (**HOT WAR**'s Terence Yin Chi-wai). The gangster is brought to trial, with Sam's fiancée, Ann (Asaka Seto), leading the prosecution team. After Night is given a five year sentence, Ann is brutally murdered while vacationing with Sam in Paris. Two years later, Sam has left the force and lives on sleepy Tai O island with his uncle (Michael Chan Wai-man) and the man's retarded brother (Frankie Ng Chi-hung, effective in a change-of-pace role). One day, Sam encounters Japanese tourist You (Seto again), who is identical to Ann and shares many of her habits. The two quickly become inseparable, with the ex-cop blissfully unaware of his intended's secret: You was the assassin

whom Night enlisted to kill Ann. She was also supposed to eliminate Sam that day, but could not bring herself to do it. Now she is hopelessly obsessed with the man whose life she has all but destroyed. When Night is released from prison, Sam heads for HK intending to murder him but when the shooting subsides, only the criminal's brother (**GEN-Y COPS**' Richard Sun Kwok-ho) lies dead. Sam then returns to Tai O, unaware that Night and his cronies are close behind.

### KEY

+	Supplements
16:9	WS TV Adaptable
CC	Closed Captioned
D	Digital
DD	Dolby Digital
DTS	Digital Theater Systems (Audio)
DVD-0	No Region Code
DVD-1	USA, Canada
DVD-2	Europe, Japan
HF	Hi-Fi
LB	Letterboxed
MA	Multiple Audio
NSR	No Suggested Retail
OOP	Out of Print
P&S	Pan&Scan
S	Stereo
SS	Surround Sound
ST	Subtitles



A HK/Japan co-production, **BULLETS OF LOVE** is a fitfully engrossing romantic thriller built around a premise doubtless inspired by elements from the South Korean smash **SHIRI** (also about a conflicted female assassin, but a far more elaborate and action-oriented project). Lai is not an especially dynamic actor, but his laconic style is reasonably effective, given the nature of his character, and the highly photogenic Seto (a popular soap opera star in her native country) is persuasive in her dual role. Prolific director/cinematographer Andrew Lau Wai-keung (**THE STORMRIDERS**, **THE DUEL**) specializes in slick, superficial productions that make few demands of an audience. He adopts a slightly less aggressive visual style here, but the film is most successful when presenting an unadorned look at Tai O and its people, who are primarily concerned with maintaining their traditional lifestyle. Some gunplay and gory violence have been included to satisfy action quotas, but may alienate the viewers most likely to respond positively to this sort of quixotic formula fare.

The Panavision frame has been reformatted to approximately 2.1 and some set-ups look a bit tight on the sides as a result. There is light wear on the materials and the splice is occasionally visible at shot change points, but colors are strong and the image is crisp. The stereo mix is appropriately forceful and makes good use of the rear channels during action sequences. The sync sound Cantonese track is available in both Dolby Digital 5.1 and DTS, and offers a mix of Cantonese, Japanese, English, Mandarin, and Taiwanese. The DVD also includes dubtracks in Mandarin and Vietnamese (2.0 mono) and optional English



*Japanese TV star Asaka Seto plays a dual role in Andrew Lau's thriller/romance BULLETS OF LOVE.*

subtitles (which, like their VHS counterparts, cover all the English dialogue). Supplements include a subtitled 20m 29s "Making Of..." program (that features interviews, extensive behind-the-scenes footage, and a terrible international trailer), filmographies for Lai and Lau, a montage of lobby cards, and several video promo spots for this and other Tai Seng DVD releases. An uncredited Frank Djeng can be heard on an audio commentary. As he was not involved with the actual making of the movie, Djeng does not provide much in the way of production trivia. Instead, he offers extensive information on Chinese traditions, particularly those of the people frequenting island communities like Tai O. It is a worthwhile talk that will interest those wishing to enhance their appreciation of HK cinema by learning more about how culture and tradition can figure into plotting and character. There is an awkward layer change at 57:02. —John Charles

## THE CRIMSON CIRCLE

### *Der Rote Kreis*

1959/60, Sinister Cinema, HF, \$16.95 plus \$2.05 P&H, 91m 34s, VHS

The second of the West German Edgar Wallace-*krimis* produced by Rialto, after **Die Frosche mit der Maske** [US: **THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE FROG**, 1959; reviewed VW 28:11], is based on his signature novel. After its publication in 1922, a red circle often accompanied Wallace's name on the jackets of his books, especially the "yellowjackets" of the English publisher Hodder and Stoughton, and the trademark was subsequently carried over to the covers of the Italian *gialli* published by Mondadori. Though not as well known as some other films in the series, **THE CRIMSON CIRCLE** is a good deal more substantial than the usual sophomore effort; it has a solid sense of definition that advances the series, much as **FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE**





Renata Ewert gasps as Scotland Yard's Inspector Parr (Karl-Georg Saebisch) comes face-to-face with *THE CRIMSON CIRCLE*.

(1962) improved upon **DR. NO** (1961)—it's better produced than the first, more stylishly filmed, but not yet as humorous, self-conscious, or overdone as the series would become.

At a prison in Toulouse, Paris, a convicted murderer named Henry Lightman is saved from hooded decapitation by a nail hammered too deeply into the guillotine stock by its drunken attendant; in compliance with French law, he is set free and, as the narrator says, "Eight years later, this nail was to cost the lives of 25 people." The story picks up in London (represented by stock footage dating back to the 1930s and '40s), where a masked figure of terror known as The Red Circle (a more accurate translation of the German title, and no doubt easier on the dubbers) is blackmailing a series of people, who are given three opportunities to comply before they are murdered. The failure of Inspector Parr (Karl-Georg Saebisch), an aging ace detective, to apprehend The Red Circle after no less

than 18 murders has become an embarrassment to Scotland Yard, and the London newspapers are howling for his badge and the hiring of younger, more innovative detectives. For this reason, Parr's boss Sir Archibald Morton (Ernst Fritz Fürbringer), teams him up with Derrick Yale (Klausjürgen Wussow), a young, know-it-all, private investigator recently in the headlines for his independent solving of "the Sussex Bank Affair"—a pairing which adds an unexpected and sometimes poignant tension to the heroic half of the story. Yale is already on the case, summoned by various blackmailers who have lost all faith in Scotland Yard. Among these are Mr. Beardmore (Alfred Schlageter), a wealthy property owner shot dead with an arrow; Lady Doringham (Edith Mill), the adulterous owner of a famous necklace, who is strangled in her car; Sir David West, a famous sculptor who is found hung by the neck in his warehouse, among his assembled works; Mr. Barbazon

(Heinz Klevenow), a banker in Beardmore's building, whom the Red Circle instructs to circulate a fortune in counterfeit banknotes; and so on. Among the suspects are the sneaky Felix Marles (Richard Lauffen), who covets Beardmore's warehouse property on the Thames and always flees at the sight of police; Beardmore's own nephew Jack (Thomas Alder), an eavesdropper and expert archer; Froyant (Fritz Rasp), an aging collector of arcana who travels to Toulouse to acquire the files of the Lightman case; Froyant's pretty secretary, Thalia Drummond (top-billed Renate Ewert, who committed suicide in 1966), who knows Inspector Parr well due to a long series of theft arrests; and others. Also on the case is *krimi* regular Eddi Arendt as Scotland Yard's humorless, play-it-by-the-book Sgt. Haggett.

The second feature directed by Jürgen Roland (credited here as "John Roland"), who learned the genre's ropes on the German TV detective series *STAHLNETZ*, **THE CRIMSON CIRCLE** evenly accentuates plot, character and atmosphere—not an easy task. It is also more faithful to its source novel than most of its kind, as tends to be true of the early adaptations scripted by Egon Eis (as "Trygve Larsen"), capably juggling a sprawling cast (one Red Circle, lots of red herrings) and providing just the right number of narrative shocks and a genuinely surprising finale. The film's quality is further accentuated by the skilled B&W cinematography of Heinz Pehlke; this is the only *krimi* he photographed, but he proves himself a true *meister* of pulp lighting, delivering an entire feature that looks (and sounds) like the heady *noir* main titles of **BATMAN** (1966). Pehlke also imaginatively works



the “circle” motif into a number of shots, including the final one, surely not all of which were scripted, making **THE CRIMSON CIRCLE** a strong contender for the most carefully designed film in the entire 32 film series. Adding to the fun is a luridly suspenseful score by Willy Mattes (**THE HEAD, HORRORS OF SPIDER ISLAND**): big-sounding, dissonant, and dripping with sin and criminal intent. This was, incidentally, the fourth filming of Wallace’s popular book, following a silent American version (featuring Victor McLaglen and **THE OLD DARK HOUSE**’s Eva Moore) made in 1922, a German remake from 1929, and a 1936 British version with Niall MacGinnis and June Duprez.

Sinister Cinema’s tape comes from a nearly flawless 16mm source of the English-dubbed version (“directed” by Peter Riethof), which looks as sharp as many of their 35mm-sourced releases. Only once, around the 38m point, does an unwelcome, finger-shaped shadow briefly flit across the screen, marring the presentation. The running time also jibes with the original German length, and nothing appears to be missing. Custom color packaging is available for this title, for an additional 50 cents; it’s okay, but the art looks like it originated from the 1922 version. Two-day Express shipping is also available for an extra \$7.50. If you order this title from Sinister’s website, don’t read their synopsis, as it doesn’t have much to do with the movie yet still manages to give away the ultimate meaning of the Red Circle, reserved for the end of the picture, which should come as a surprise. —Tim Lucas

## DAGON

**Dagon—La secta del mar**

*“Dagon—Sect of the Sea”*

2001, Lions Gate Entertainment, HF/SS, \$69.99, VHS

DD-5.1/MA/16:9/LB/ST/+, \$24.99, DVD-1, 98m 4s

After the success of **RE-ANIMATOR** in 1985, director Stuart Gordon and writer Dennis Paoli next planned to adapt H.P. Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” for the big screen. However, the story’s scale was too costly for Empire Pictures to undertake, so the project was shelved. Over a decade and a half later, they were finally able to proceed with the picture, which also incorporates elements from Lovecraft’s first published story, the six-page “Dagon” (1917). While vacationing with another couple off the coast of Spain, nerdy dotcom millionaire Paul (Ezra Godden, who resembles a young Woody Allen) and Barbara (Raquel Merono) find themselves in peril when a freak storm scuttles their boat on a rock. Making their way to the coastal fishing village of Imboca, the pair are separated, and Paul finds himself besieged by the deformed, zombie-like locals. Encountering elderly alcoholic Ezequiel (Francisco Rabál, memorable in his final role), the region’s last normal human, the American learns that the villagers rejected God and began worshipping an undersea deity called Dagon. Human sacrifices resulted and now, decades later, the people are mutating into octopus-like monsters. Paul’s life is spared because he has a mysterious connection to the Imbocans’ half-transformed High Priestess (Macarena Gomez), but Barbara has been chosen to bear Dagon’s offspring.

One of several recent co-productions between producer Brian

Yuzna’s Fantastic Factory and the Spanish company Filmax International, **DAGON** benefits greatly from its “olde world” location work. The ancient town of Combarro and crumbling, waterlogged interiors (mostly real locales with little in the way of art direction) provide an ideal backdrop for the Lovecraftian style of horror, which relies heavily on detailed depictions of sinister environments to generate an impenetrably ominous atmosphere. The effect is further heightened by a spare score and extensive use of handheld cameras, lending realism to the numerous sequences where Godden is being pursued by the gruesome townsfolk. Once the particulars are in place, Gordon moves the story along with his trademark swiftness, but never at the expense of the characters (who evolve nicely), and the marvelously perverse marriage of sex and death that featured so memorably in **RE-ANIMATOR** and **FROM BEYOND** also figures here. There is a very strong gore sequence that pushes the absolute limits of the “R” rating, but the picture never sells out its solid craftsmanship and absorbing concepts. Even the false shocks show more inspiration than usual, eliciting an appreciative smile, rather than serving as a reminder of how bereft of ideas most genre productions are nowadays.

The VHS version looks and sounds good, but the DVD is the way to go. The anamorphic 1.80:1 presentation boasts solid colors and satisfying contrasts. Much of the film is conceptually misty and the rain is non-stop, but Crest National’s compression handles these sequences smoothly. The stereo mix features an impressive low end and is effectively enveloping when called for. English captions





*High priestess Macarena Gomez prepares to offer a sacrifice to the god DAGON, in Stuart Gordon's latest H.P. Lovecraft adaptation.*

(which help one to comprehend portions of Rabal's heavily accented delivery) and Spanish subtitles are included.

Supplements consist of a red tagged trailer, sections devoted to storyboards and production art (the latter featuring some wild creature designs that were evidently too elaborate to pull off), and two commentaries. On the first, Gordon and Paoli state that little more than the setting was changed from the original draft, and they also discuss where they strayed from Lovecraft's work; reveal that Imboca is actually Spanish for "in the mouth"; and discuss the history of Dagon (an actual philistine god that was half-human, half-fish), mentioning how several aspects of this religion ended up being incorporated into Catholicism, which adds an extra

wrinkle to the film's battle of religions. It is an illuminating discussion and the interplay between the two longtime friends keeps things moving along nicely. The other commentary track features Gordon and Godden (who is British and affects a perfect American accent in the movie) and is a more off-the-cuff conversation consisting predominantly of production anecdotes. Godden sites Harold Lloyd as the influence for his character and reminisces about the incredibly wet and cold winter shooting conditions. The director provides further tales about accidents and weather-related hardships, as well as additional production details. Left clicking on the main menu page highlights the Lions Gate logo, allowing one to access trailers for **CROCODILE 2: DEATH SWAMP** and

**FRAILTY**. There is an obvious layer change at 1:11:59. A Spanish subtitled VHS version is also available for \$69.99. Onscreen title: **H.P. LOVECRAFT'S DAGON**. —John Charles

## ED GEIN

aka **IN THE LIGHT OF THE MOON**

2000, First Look Home Entertainment, HF/SS, \$9.98, VHS DD-2.0/SS/ST/+, \$14.98, DVD-0, 88m 30s

With the glut of serial killer films during the past decade, it was certain that someone would take another look at the Plainfield, Wisconsin handyman whose ghoulish deeds already influenced **PSYCHO**, **THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE**, **THREE ON A MEAT-HOOK**, **THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS**, and (most directly) **DERANGED**. Director Chuck Parello





*Steve Railsback, formerly Charles Manson, is now ED GEIN.*

(**HENRY: PORTRAIT OF A SERIAL KILLER 2: MASK OF SANITY**) signals his intention to make this the most accurate depiction of Gein to date by opening the picture with battered B&W newsreel footage of actual townsfolk remarking on what a nice, normal man he seemed to be. The film's closing moments also offer a look at the real Gein leading lawmen around his farm, before being hustled back into a police car. **ED GEIN** does ultimately fulfil Parello's goal, though it is not without some cinematic license. The killer's preference for plump, middle-aged women is correctly depicted here, in contrast to the thirtysomething waitress and teenage clerk that Roberts Blossom's "Ezra Cobb" preyed

upon in 1974's **DERANGED** [reviewed VW 18:16]. However, like that earlier production, the time frame has been considerably condensed: the two aforementioned victims actually met their fate a few years apart.

Steve Railsback (**HELTER SKELTER**) plays Gein (first shown peeking out of an open grave) in a low-key manner that works best when the actor imparts the awkward, socially retarded mannerisms of this deeply lonely, obtuse man. Carrie Snodgrass appropriately plays to the back row as Gein's fire-and-brimstone harridan of a mother. However, the reedy actress is physically wrong for the part; Gein's victims reflected his mother's body size, making

someone like Kathy Bates a better candidate. There are also overt references to cannibalism, which is about the only malfeasance Gein consistently denied having partaken. The movie was released state-side to theaters and video without a rating, though it is not clear why. While Railsback is shown briefly parading around in a skin mask and apron, and some mutilated corpses and body parts are also seen, the depiction of the actual murders is quite restrained, falling far short of the Gein-esque depravity on display in **DAGON** and **HANNIBAL**, both of which were awarded an "R."

However well intentioned, **ED GEIN** nonetheless emerges as one of the more pointless



efforts this cycle has produced to date. Gein's atrocities have already been vividly depicted in so many other pictures that this one seems more akin to those politely unpleasant E! channel schlockumentaries. Restraint and suggestion are two key approaches in the horror genre but, if that is the route chosen, a filmmaker must have more on his agenda than simply chronicling events. Parelo's effort is a competently produced and performed work, but it offers no fresh insight into the psychology of its main character or the townspeople who unknowingly let him go about his depraved ways for almost a decade. It is a sad comment on society to note that the story of a man who robbed graves, defiled corpses, and decorated his home with human bone fails to make much of an impression in 2002. However, in the end, **ED GEIN** merely seems superfluous, an old story told one too many times and with too little panache.

The fullscreen transfer would benefit from 1.85:1 matting and looks slightly soft (likely by design), but is otherwise well-rendered. The stereo mix is not all that aggressive by horror standards, but it suits the tone of the production. A trailer and optional Spanish subtitles are included on the DVD but no guide to the 23 chapters is provided in the menu or on an insert. Those with multi-region players are directed to the far preferable UK release from Tartan Films (which produced the movie). That all-region PAL disc is 16:9 and, in addition to a trailer, also offers deleted scenes and a booklet of production notes/interviews by Alan Jones. —John Charles

## THE EXQUISITE CADAVER

*Las Cruces*

"The Cruel Ones"

aka *El Cadáver Exquisito*

1969, *Something Weird Video*, HF/+, \$15.00, 91m 10s, VHS

The first (and only other) horror film by Vicente Aranda, Catalán director of the well-regarded *La Novia Ensangrientada* [US: **THE BLOOD SPATTERED BRIDE**, 1972], this is the kind of movie bound to either exhilarate or annoy the curious. The elliptic, willfully mysterious story begins with the arresting scene of an attractive young woman (**LUST FOR A VAMPIRE**'s Judy Matheson) resting her neck on a rail in front of an oncoming train. We are then introduced to a new protagonist, an unnamed horror comics publisher (Carlos Estrada), who receives a parcel containing a woman's severed hand—it may, or may not, be made of wax. At home, his wife (**YOUNG HANNAH, QUEEN OF THE VAMPIRES**' Teresa Gimpera) intercepts an unsigned telegram asking him, "Would you be interested in a forearm?" He covertly buries the hand in a nearby park and arrives at work, only to discover a somewhat longer parcel awaiting him on his desk at the office. He deliberately loses the unopened package in a public place, but an identical package is delivered to his home, containing not a forearm, but a torn dress, a photograph of an attractive woman (not the suicide), and a vague, reproachful note. In time, the publisher meets the woman in the photograph—Palmer (an icy Capucine), who has an artificial hand—and surrenders himself to her program of justice. She drives him to a secluded villa, where he once conducted an affair with a young

woman, Esther (Matheson), whom Palmer announces is now dead. Once there, Palmer begins to flirt with him in a cold way ("Do you find me attractive? Despite my artificial hand... or *because* of it?") and offers him a tab of LSD; he takes it and wanders through the villa, reliving his old affair, eventually finding Esther's nude corpse preserved in a refrigerator (a shock image bound to remind new viewers of a similar key shot in **RABID**, 1977). He wakes the next morning at home, his skin dyed yellow, and his wife tells the story of how she retrieved him from the villa. After hearing her husband's explanation of his adventure, the wife drives to the villa to get Palmer's version of the previous night's events, which form a completely different, though no less surreal, story. When the wife challenges its veracity, Palmer offers the full account of her background with the dead girl, a fashion model whom she rescued from an abusive husband, and with whom she formed a romantic attachment before she met and fell in love with the publisher, whose interest in macabre subjects encouraged her masochism ("I despise the painless days before we met") and suicidal tendencies ("I always wanted my death to belong to someone").

We never do get to the bottom of this baroque intaglio (even the final parcel subtly contradicts the veracity of an earlier scene), Aranda preferring to construct a kind of **RASHOMON** for the Antonioni generation, which is not a bad thing for a film to be. Co-scripted by Aranda and Mariana Alcoforado (who wrote the love letters read by Matheson, a task she later repeated for Jess Franco's **LOVE LETTERS OF A PORTUGUESE NUN**, 1977), **THE EXQUISITE CADAVER**



initially unfolds as a many layered, existential mystery, pushing many of the same buttons as, say, Alain Robbe-Grillet's fiction or Antonioni's **BLOW UP** (1966). However, as the women begin to offer their sides of the same story, and as the husband begins to confide openly in his wife, the film reveals its fuller nature as a study of the ways in which male and female perspectives differ in matters of romance. The serious male, more dependent on mystery in his love life, describes his own feelings as "frivolous and stupid," while the practical females view feelings as "meaningful"—yet neither side seems capable of showing their true feelings to the other, until

they are frightened into doing so by the contents of the parcels, which can be read as presentiments of approaching death. (The three living principals are all middle-aged.) This is a slow-paced film, pretentious in some ways, but also a hypnotic one if encountered in the right mood. Elegant photography by Fernando Arribas (**THE BLOOD SPATTERED BRIDE, LEGEND OF BLOOD CASTLE**) helps, as does a minimal but haunting score by Marco Rossi. Spanish horror *aficionados* will enjoy a brief but characteristic appearance by the ubiquitous, wall-eyed Victor Israel as a hotel *portiere*; when he talks, he appears to have real vampire fangs. Some sources

list Italian director/producer Tonino Cervi as co-director.

This fullscreen presentation may be the best-looking VHS release we've ever seen from Something Weird Video. The film elements are colorful, crisp and spotless, and the English post-synch track is nice and clear, with Capucine and Matheson dubbing their own performances. The movie was acquired for US release in 1973 by Wheeler Films (their only release, according to the IMDb), who may have side-stepped some lab costs in the preparation of this print; it carries no credits whatsoever, and the few instances when languages other than English are spoken remain unsubtitled—yet this is definitely a release print, as it carries an MPAA R rating

*Carlos Estrada receives strange parcels  
in Vicente Aranda's compelling THE EXQUISITE CADAVER.*





card. There is a shot in the last 15m of the movie, an overhead view of Capucine scissoring the dress from Matheson's dead body, in which her pubic region is obscured by a hanging light—an obvious matte effect which may have been added by Aranda to lend dimension to the shot, or added later in America to censor full-frontal nudity. An R-rated trailer (2m 5s) follows the feature, overstating the horror angle to a preposterous degree, and it is followed by trailers for **THE DEADLY ORGAN**, **TEENAGE ZOMBIES**, **THE SINISTER MONK**, and **THE EMBALMER/THE SHE BEAST**—all of them a pleasure to watch. —Tim Lucas

## KEEP YOUR RIGHT UP!

***Soigne Ta Droite!***

aka **KEEP UP YOUR RIGHT!**,  
**WATCH YOUR RIGHT!**

1987, Facets Video, HF/S/ST,  
\$79.95, 81m 4s, VHS

***Soigne Ta Droite!*** is Jean-Luc Godard's *hommage* to physical slapstick, exemplified by filmmakers such as Jerry Lewis, Mack Sennett, and Jacques Tati. It is one of a number of Godard films that have remained difficult to see, and was shown commercially in the United States only last year. Likewise, **KING LEAR**, a Cannon Films production which Godard made shortly before ***Soigne Ta Droite!***, opened commercially in France for the first time in the spring of 2002. Unfortunately, his idiosyncratic version of **KING LEAR** (also released in 1987), which featured Burgess Meredith, Molly Ringwald, Woody Allen, and Norman Mailer, issued on VHS as part of Xenon's Cinematheque Collection in 1992, is now OOP. While Godard's films remain sporadically available on home video,



*An airline pilot obsessed with reading accounts of suicide—one of the many bizarre supporting characters in Jean-Luc Godard's wacky comedy, KEEP YOUR RIGHT UP!*

Facets Video has made an important contribution to the availability of Godard's films in the US.

As with other films Godard made in the 1980s that revealed his commitment to avant-garde filmmaking—such as **PASSION** [*Passion*, 1982] and **FIRST NAME: CARMEN** [*Prénom: Carmen*, 1983]—***Soigne Ta Droite!*** dispenses with the ordinary practices of classical cinema: narrative, plot, representation, even characterization, and with its static camera and long takes, it belies an interest in images themselves; that is, in the film still, eschewing the normal cinematic emphasis on editing. The film is composed of three fragmented narratives intercut with each other. Godard himself plays a comic character called “The Idiot” (and sometimes “The Prince”) who has been guaranteed payment for a film—if he can deliver it within 24 hours. Another thread focuses on the French techno-pop duo Rita

Mitsouko, who are working on some new songs (recalling Godard's filming of the Rolling Stones in **SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL** aka **ONE PLUS ONE** [1968] and the classical ensemble in **FIRST NAME: CARMEN**). There are also a number of gags about golf and travel, the latter concerning an airline pilot who is studying a book on suicide, much to the dismay of his passengers (the name of the airline is TAT, a nod to Jacques Tati). No character is given a name but only a generic title. Jacques Villeret, for instance, plays “The Man,” and is once referred to as “The Ant,” who appears throughout as a disenfranchised laborer who attempts to convince those of the upper classes to share his concerns, recalling a similar theme in **WEEK-END** (1967). The venerable François Perier plays a character called simply “The Individual,” and it is his meditations that serve as the voiceover heard throughout the film.





Jean-Luc Godard himself portrays "The Idiot" in *KEEP YOUR RIGHT UP!*, his homage to Frank Tashlin/Jerry Lewis comedies.

The video sleeve carries the encomiums "A Mind-Boggling Comedy" and "A New Comic Masterpiece," both of which, intentionally or not, may give the wrong impression about the film. The film is not "new," given that it was released in 1987, and the buyer should be aware that Godardian comedy is not Hollywood comedy. There are comic moments, to be sure, but Godard has pushed the notion of narrative coherence to its limit. Certainly the best film comedies exist as a series of disconnected gags or moments (as in the films of Tati), but in this particular film, there is no narrative spine to hold the various threads together. In fact, the comic bits are primarily confined to the fragment featuring Godard. It is not uncommon for Godard to cast himself in the role of the fool, as he did in **FIRST NAME: CARMEN** and in **KING LEAR**. We can therefore recommend the film to those interested in Godard and in the *avant-garde* or experimental cinema, that is, to a fairly narrow spectrum of viewers.

Given the occasional minor speckling and scratching, the source material for Facets Video's VHS edition transfer is therefore taken from a positive print source. The image is vivid and colorful, with good contrasts and accurate fleshtones. The feature is presented full-frame and is obviously priced for rental. For those seriously interested in collecting Godard, Facets has also issued a no-frills DVD of *Soigne Ta Droite!*, priced at \$29.95. —Rebecca & Sam Umland

### MEGIDDO: THE OMEGA CODE 2

2001, GoodTimes Entertainment, HF/SS/CC, \$19.95, 105m 37s, VHS

The predecessor of **MEGIDDO: THE OMEGA CODE 2**, the doomsday thriller **THE OMEGA CODE** [reviewed VW 63:19], gained notoriety when it landed in the US box-office Top 10 in 1999 without the benefit of a major media advertising campaign or Hollywood studio backing. Given the earlier film's

financial success, it's no wonder that TBN Productions funded a sequel. Like its predecessor, **MEGIDDO**'s executive producer was TV evangelist Paul Crouch. In contrast to **THE OMEGA CODE**, which borrowed ideas from Michael Drosnin's 1997 bestseller *THE BIBLE CODE*, concerning prophecies allegedly encrypted within the Torah, **MEGIDDO** delves into the eschatological ("end of time") prophecies in the Book of Revelation ("Megiddo" is the ancient word for "Armageddon"). A recent *TIME* Magazine cover story examined the burgeoning interest in the Biblical apocalypse, pointing to the widespread popularity of the eschatological novels by authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Interestingly, according to *TIME*'s article, only about half of those who read the LaHaye and Jenkins novels are evangelical churchgoers. Apparently, after the events of September 11, and the subsequent anthrax scare, sales of these novels rose by roughly 60 percent.

By analogy, about half of the potential audience for doomsday thrillers such as **MEGIDDO** presumably consists of non-evangelicals. **MEGIDDO**'s PG-13 rating suggests as much, the rating primarily a consequence of its violent action and its rather lavishly detailed Satanic rituals. Most certainly, the film's intended audience is not children. **MEGIDDO**'s producers, like Canadian Christian filmmakers Peter and Paul Lalonde (**REVELATION, TRIBULATION**), have hired Hollywood actors whose former glory has faded. Michael York reprises his **OMEGA CODE** role as the villainous media mogul Stone Alexander (York is credited as co-producer as well). Other cast members include Udo Kier (!) as Alexander's evil henchman, Diane Venora as



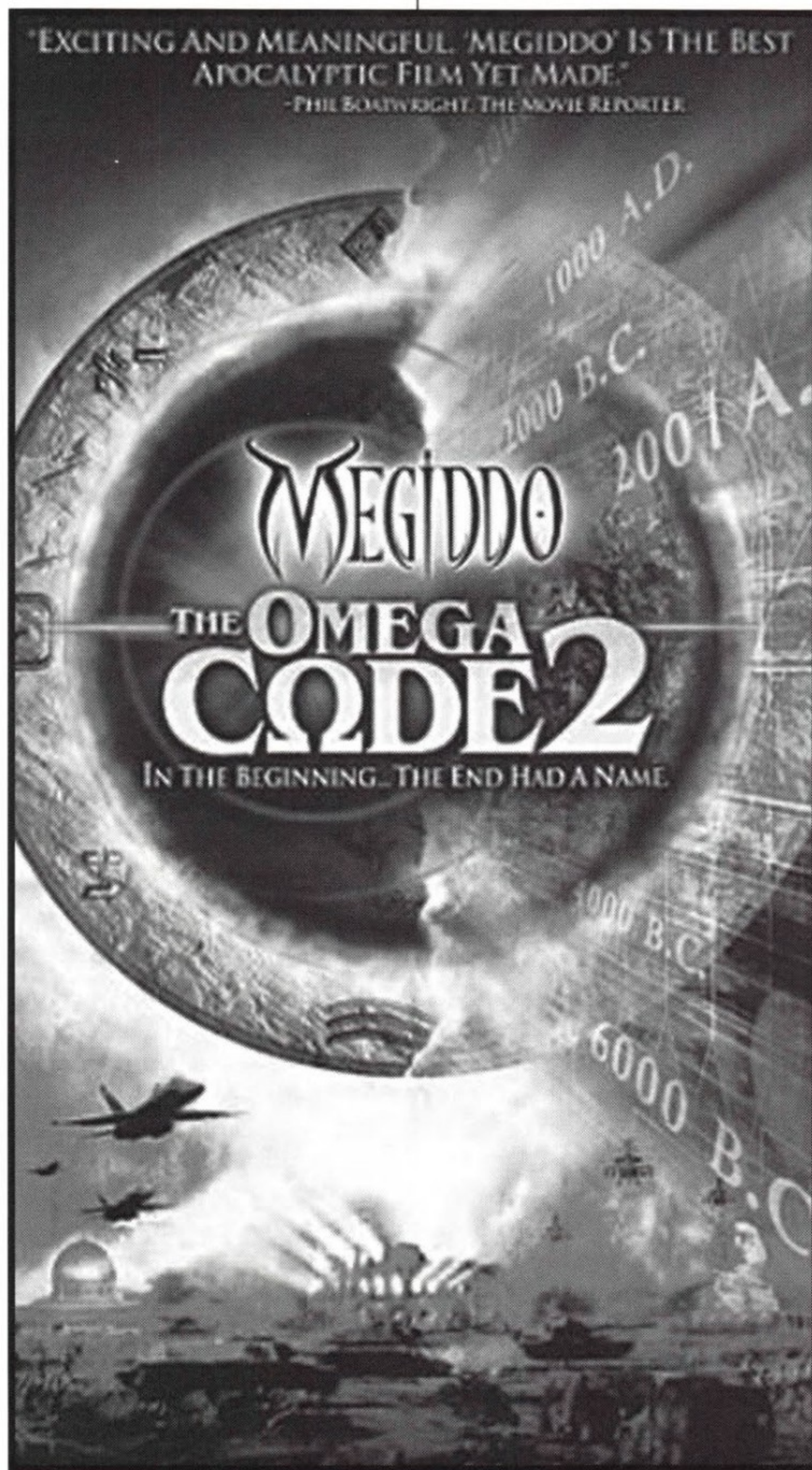
Alexander's wife, **FULL METAL JACKET**'s R. Lee Ermey, **THE TERMINATOR**'s Michael Biehn, and David Hedison. The film also features appearances by Franco Nero and ADAM-12's Kent McCord.

Billionaire, megalomaniacal demagogue (and, as it turns out,

Anti-Christ) Stone Alexander (York) has used his wealth and power to nominate himself as World Chancellor, his only opposition coming from leaders in China, South America, and the United States. He is not only opposed in his goal to become the world's sole leader by US

President Richard Benson (Ermey), but by his own brother David (Biehn), who happens to be Benson's Vice-President. After Stone successfully kills off his adversary Benson, David becomes President, but is opposed by members of his administration, who wish to join forces with Stone. In order to oust brother David as President, Stone disseminates a doctored video on which David is shown murdering his father (Hedison). After a coup nearly results in his arrest (and probable assassination), David surreptitiously travels to the Middle East for a showdown with his brother. However, he realizes he cannot do it alone, and calls on God to give him the strength and courage to carry out his mission.

Despite some well-handled action sequences and competent performances by its cast, the film's plot is, to put it mildly, entirely implausible. If the battle of Armageddon will actually demand such an improbable concatenation of events to occur (for instance, the President of the United States, as a fugitive from the law, sneaking through enemy lines to kill the Anti-Christ with his revolver), rest assured that it will never take place. But screenwriters John Fasano (**UNIVERSAL SOLDIER: THE RETURN**) and Stephan Blinn (**THE OMEGA CODE**), and British director Brian Trenchard-Smith, have an even greater problem with which to contend: the utter lack of suspense. Are we ever to doubt God's eventual triumph over Satan? Are we to imagine Evil will triumph over Good? Is the outcome ever in question? In addition to this problem, we must also admit to the profound distrust of a film whose putative pacifist spiritual message occurs within the context of the representation of total world war.







Hero and heroine in the clutches of a mad monk in the 1938 film of Edgar Wallace's hit play, *THE TERROR*.

GoodTimes' VHS edition has the feature film presentation preceded by approximately 5m of introductions by author Hal Lindsey ("The Apocalypse—Megiddo Revealed") and executive producer Paul Crouch. (One thinks of Cecil B. DeMille's alleged response to the question of why he made so many Biblical epics: "Why turn down two thousand years of publicity?") Predictably, they try to connect current events to end-time events as prophesied in the Book of Revelation. The film is presented full-screen, with a finely detailed, crisp picture and an excellent stereo surround soundtrack (this was *not* a low-budget production). The picture is adequately closed-captioned.

A DVD of **MEGIDDO** has also been issued by GoodTimes Entertainment (\$24.95 list) with the feature letterboxed at 1.85:1 with 16:9 enhancement, a DD-5.1

soundtrack, and additional supplements including DVD-ROM features. The DVD issue is also closed-captioned. —Rebecca & Sam Umland

### THE TERROR

1938, *Sinister Cinema*, HF, \$16.95 plus \$2.05 P&H, 70m 3s, VHS

One of the most filmed Edgar Wallace thrillers was his popular 1926 stage play *THE TERROR*, novelized as *TERROR KEEP* in 1927; it was first filmed under its original title in 1928, spawned a sequel called **RETURN OF THE TERROR** in 1934, and was remade as this British production, featuring Bernard Lee, Alastair Sim, former Sherlock Holmes Arthur Wontner, and Wilfred Lawson—which was in turn followed, decades later, by the West German *krimis* **Das Umheimliche Monch**


[US: **THE SINISTER MONK**, 1965] and **Das Monch mit der Peitsche** [US: **THE COLLEGE GIRL MURDERS**, 1967]. The story opens with a prologue of sorts, in which two-bit criminals Joe Connor (Henry Oscar) and Soapy Marks (Sim) join a masked compatriot, known to them as Mike O'Shea, in the theft of £300,000 in gold. Shortly after the robbery, an anonymous phone tip lands Connor and Marks in custody and they spend the next ten years in prison, planning their revenge against O'Shea. Upon their release, the two go independently to the Monks Hall Priory, the former keep of a sect of devil-worshipping monks, where they have reason to believe the gold is being kept. The priory is now the property of Colonel Redmayne (Wontner); Connor begs him for work but is turned away, and Marks disguises himself as a



priest, the Rev. Ernest Partridge, and is reluctantly admitted when the weather turns bad, as is Ferdie Fane (Lee), a perpetually drunk loiterer who falls in love with the Colonel's daughter, Mary (Linden Travers), at first sight. He's not alone in being attracted to her; Mr. Goodman (Wilfred Lawson), the greying priory gardener, expresses his clammy romantic interest as well, and is rebuffed. But there is more to Fane than meets the eye; he sobers up instantly at sight of Connor and Marks, speaks to them threateningly, and may well be O'Shea. Climaxing a stormy night, Connor turns up dead inside the main house, which brings in pudgy, middle-aged Superintendent Hallick (John Turnbull) of Scotland Yard—not the dashing detective Inspector Bradley, as hoped by two other guests of the Colonel, Mrs. Elvery (Iris Hoey, a crime buff who keeps a murder clippings scrapbook) and her daughter Veronica (Lesley Wareing), who have seen a mysterious monk walking the grounds by moonlight.

One of only two features directed by actor Richard Bird (who subsequently played Inspector Sneed in 1940's **THE DOOR WITH SEVEN LOCKS**, opposite Leslie Banks), **THE TERROR** unreels very much like a stage play, complete with fades to accommodate changes of scenery, and some canny staging ideas that, one imagines, sent absolute chills through 1920s audiences; *THE TERROR* was the *PHANTOM OF THE OPERA* of its day. There are lots of roles written to be played heavy on the ham, sudden loud knocks at the door, thunder and lightning, menacing silhouettes at windows and movements behind curtains, off-stage organ playing, and more than a few opportunities for twittering, starry-eyed, high-flown

romance. But Alastair Sim has the best moment, when he returns—gaunt and bloody-faced, after an attempt on his life, emerging from a secret wall compartment—to exact his surprise revenge on the monk who betrayed him. But this version of **THE TERROR** brings little to the screen that wasn't probably already seen on the stage. Bird's direction is pedestrian, the dialogue is often poorly recorded (character names are impossible to make out, making the end scroll much appreciated), and there's very little music, none of which is really used for effect. The cinematography of Walter J. Harvey (who later shot another Wallace adaptation, **THE FLYING SQUAD** [1940] and Hammer's **THE QUATERMASS EXPERIMENT**, 1955) may look a bit creaky to eyes raised on the Rialto *krimis*, but it is occasionally effective (note the heightened lighting on the face of the monk, once his identity is revealed, accentuating his madness) and very attentive to the various moods of Wallace's fiction, not least of all its sentiment. Despite its faults, **THE TERROR** would not be a bad way to spend a stormy night, though its interest is now primarily historical.

Sinister Cinema doesn't mention its source material for this title, but it looks like an enhanced copy of an uninterrupted PAL>NTSC television broadcast. The image quality is very good, considering the film's age; it's clean with the expected levels of grain, but the generational loss involved in the copying compromises the image slightly, with some mild noise outlining people and objects. The mono sound quality is passable, though, as stated earlier, the original recording renders some of the dialogue indistinct. —Tim Lucas 

## SOURCES

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## The Film Bulletin Reviews, 1969-1974

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### THE ABOMINABLE DR. PHIBES

Grand fun with Vincent Price eliminating victims via Old Testament curses. Bizarre, well-made and often clever horror spoof with good prospects for intended market and strong potential for broader situations if imaginatively sold. Rating: GP.

Organ music fills the night. A hooded figure seated at a Wurlitzer, its pink lucite pipes shimmering, rises from the floor. The Phantom of the Opera? No, it's The Abominable Dr. Phibes: Vincent Price in his hundredth film. To celebrate the occasion, AIP has concocted a genuinely screwball vehicle which seems destined to take off in the regular horror markets and has tongue-in-cheek potential to perform in better situations as well. If imaginatively sold, it might produce surprisingly strong grosses in class markets. Successful horror spoofs are as rare as werewolf tusks, but **PHIBES** manages to serve up enough style, wit and—yes—even subtlety, along with some pretty horrific horrors, to entertain a broad range of audiences. Price is the pasty-looking, living corpse of a famed Vaudevillian out to avenge his wife's death by dispatching her doctors via the ten curses visited upon Pharaoh in the Old Testament. Considering that it's basically little more than a parade of atrocities, James Whiten and William Goldstein's screenplay is full of fruitily funny moments and bizarre images. One victim's head is crushed at a party by a contracting frog's head mask, another awakens to find vampire bats crawling all over him, and one is chewed up by rabid rats in the cockpit of his plane. Cameo co-star Terry

Thomas has his blood drained and bottled. Especially nice is a brass unicorn which is catapulted into a men's club from across the street, impaling an unfortunate character to the wall; it has to be unscrewed. (A bystander observes, "I think it's a left-hand thread.") All the while, Price and his shapely aide and dance partner Virginia North look on approvingly. Soon only Joseph Cotten is left, his teenage son Sean Bury locked to an operating table below a tube of acid. Cotten has six minutes to operate and remove the key, implanted near the boy's heart, before the acid drips. He makes it, though he doesn't sew the kid up again. Price escapes into his wife's secret coffin and embalms himself to lie in state for the sequel, already underway. Hampered only by a slightly pinchpenny atmosphere, director Robert Fuest (**WUTHERING HEIGHTS**) gets the most out of the weird '30s-style sets and Phibes' offbeat accoutrements, such as a robot band that plays golden oldies like "Darktown Strutters Ball." Actually, this British-made entry commands about as much charm and class as the genre can master, and it constantly surprises with unexpectedly bright moments, such as one in which Price pours a drink into his neck (he operates entirely via electrode and speaks through a Victrola). Vintage period tunes are used on the track for black-comic counterpoint, most of which will be, alas, hopelessly obscure to the predominately young audiences Phibes will attract. Price scores neatly this time out in a limiting role, supported by a good cast. Hugh Griffith has a bit as a rabbi, Peter Jeffrey is a perplexed inspector, and the various victims meet their unlikely deaths with aplomb.





Joseph Cotten must perform emergency surgery on his own son to obtain the key to freedom from Vincent Price's *THE ABOMINABLE DR. PHIBES*.

1971. American International. Movielab Color. 90 minutes. Vincent Price, Joseph Cotten, Produced by Louis M. Heyward and Roy Dunes. Directed by Robert Fuest.

***THE ABOMINABLE DR. PHIBES*** is currently available on VHS and 16:9 DVD from MGM Home Entertainment. We reviewed the DVD (and that of its sequel, ***DR. PHIBES RISES AGAIN***) in VW 83:7.

## COUNT YORGA, VAMPIRE

Familiar grade-B horror tale delivers the grue in time-honored fashion. Minor item will serve as exploitable dualler for action, neighborhood and drive-in situations. Rating: GP.

Any picture with a cornball title like **COUNT YORGA, VAMPIRE** can't be all bad, and this American International release does manage a fair share of scary moments for dedicated horror fans, which should render this minor horror item serviceable as a ballyhoo item for summer

drive-in and neighborhood dualler use. With son Michael Macready billed as producer and actor, veteran George Macready makes it a family affair by intoning the hokey opening and closing narration. Robert Quarry, a Hurd Hatfield type with a Christopher Lee profile, is the hypnotic vampire whose timeworn "I-promise-you-eternal-life" lure still proves irresistible to women. Former actor Bob Kelljan directs his wispy script with no frills. Just shaky grade B competence, bolstered somewhat by a nice contrast between the realistic modern world of freeways and kitchenettes, and the medieval otherworldliness of the vampire superstition. This is neatly evidenced by the shamefaced manner in which the inevitable doctor reticently advances his vampire theory. There's just enough blood and suggested sex, normal and otherwise, to earn a profitable GP rating for a film with plenty of kiddie appeal. Performances by the unknown cast are okay down the line. A lonely soul given to moping around his rented mansion (which



came complete with imbecile rapist gatekeeper) the Count puts a couple of young ladies Under His Power at a Seance. and then traps lovers Judith Lang and Michael Murphy in their VW bus in the woods near his home. During the night, the girl is attacked, and the next day she seems a little pale. She also sports nasty punctures in her neck. but nobody thinks much of them until her boyfriend catches her eating a kitten. Local doctor Roger Perry diagnoses vampirism, but can't convince the police. When Miss Lang and friend Donna Anders disappear. Murphy tracks them to the mansion, where he disappears as well. Perry and Miss Anders' paramour Michael Macready arm themselves with makeshift crosses and wooden stakes and head for the Count's place. There they battle a host of lady vampires, including Miss Lang. Perry is killed, but Macready manages to turn Quarry into a gurgling pile of dust before he, too, is vampirized by Miss Anders. "Superstition'?" chuckles George Macready. "Hahahahaha!" Horror fans will note at least one scene stolen directly from **HORROR OF DRACULA**. Photographer Arch Archambault provides lots of shots of lightning and moonlit clouds shrouded in filmy Movielab Color, and William Marx's music is functional. The pointy vampire fangs are credited to Master Dentalsmith.

1970. AIP (An Erica Production). Movielab Color. 91 minutes. Robert Quarry. Roger Perry, Michael Murphy, Michael Macready, Donna Anders. Produced by Michael Macready. Directed by Robert Kelljan.

**COUNT YORGA, VAMPIRE** is currently available on VHS and DVD from MGM Home Entertainment, the disc anamorphically enhanced. Originally titled **THE LOVES OF COUNT IORGA... VAMPIRE** and undertaken as an Adults Only item (note Marsha Jordan as one of Yorga's vampire brides), it was filmed straight at the 11th hour suggestion of star Robert Quarry. When the finished film was awarded an R rating by the MPAA, its acquirer AIP (who retitled it) voluntarily removed most of the scene of Judith Lang eating her kitten to earn a GP rating. This footage has been restored to the film by MGM, along with its original onscreen title.

## EQUINOX

Teenagers battle giant monsters in tame, inept fantasy thriller that will get by on drive-in duallers, kiddie matinees. Rating: GP.

**EQUINOX** harks back to those dear, dead, vacuous days when the teenagers-vs.-monster formula was a boxoffice natural. Today, however, only the kiddies can dig this sort of

obviousness, and whatever market value the VIP Distributors release has rests solely with the family drive-ins and indoor matinee feature bookings. Elsewhere, its naive fantasy, choppy editing and dull mars of earnest amateurism dim its bottom-bill commercial appeal. Made in spurts over a three-year period, the Jack H. Harris production follows the pattern he used in **THE BLOB**, and in fact, except for some with-it dialogue like "Hey, listen, man, this is getting pretty far out," it might have been assembled the same way in 1958. The skimpy plot-line has four incredibly square teenagers (Edward Connell, Barbara Hewitt, Frank Boers, Jr., and Robin Christopher) pursued by huge creatures who want an ancient book of Satanic formulas they found in a cave. Following some byplay with an invisible boundary to the world of the supernatural, a disappearing castle and an evil forest ranger who turns out to be the Devil, all the principals are killed except Connell, who is last seen struggling in a straitjacket, crying "I'm not crazy!" The special effects, which should carry most of the burden in a film of this sort, are simply not up to it. The monsters, including an enormous, scaly something-or-other and an unjolly green giant, are afforded little screen time. The stop-motion effects, credited to Dennis Muren, David Allen and Jim Danforth, are highly uneven and the matte work is generally poor. Though obviously inspired by the work of Ray Harryhausen, the monster designs leave a lot to be desired, particularly a *papier-maché* flying devil. Connell and Boers, both a bit long in the tooth for the teenage hero roles, come off sappily. Writer-director Jack Woods, who plays the ranger with a variety of contorted expressions, makes an occasional stab at inventiveness via tricky lenses and fast editing, but the overall effect is still blah. Deluxe Color photography, some of it apparently blown up from 16mm, is grainy but bright. An attempted rape, out of place in this juvenile entry, prompted the GP rating.

1968-1971. VIP Distributor (A Tonylyn Production). DeLuxe Color. 82 minutes. Edward Connell, Barbara Hewitt. Produced by Jack H. Harris. Directed by Jack Woods.

Said to be the primary inspiration for Sam Raimi's **THE EVIL DEAD**, **EQUINOX** was released on the Wizard Video label in the 1980s, under its actual title, then in a retitled and repackaged version, **THE BEAST**. It was also issued in Canada in the early '80s by Vogue Video. A digitally restored version has been shown on American Movie Classics within the last year, but no video release has been announced.



## THE RETURN OF COUNT YORGA

The fangy Count returns to give evil its finest hour in a stylishly chilling horror spoof that should prove a big winner for drive-in, ballyhoo markets. Rating: GP.

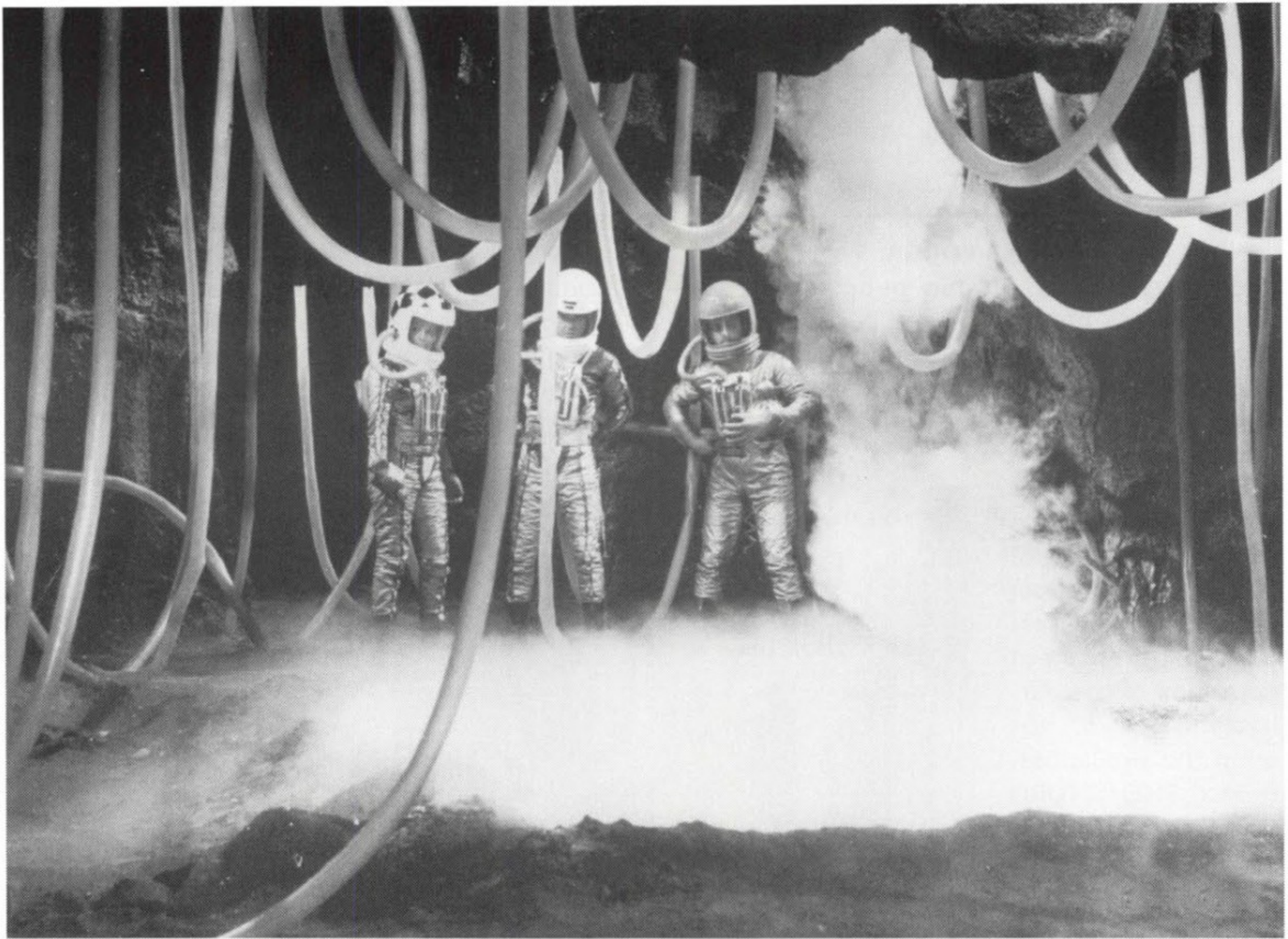
Last year's **COUNT YORGA, VAMPIRE** managed to rise above its mini-budget limitations through sheer imagination and became a minor hit. Now, the same talents behind that film have been given the opportunity to make the movie they initially envisioned and the resulting AIP release is a virtual remake of the earlier picture, but it is so superior in terms of performance, production and directorial accomplishment that even fans of the earlier movie will not mind the similarities. In fact, **THE RETURN OF COUNT YORGA** is one of the year's more delightful surprises in the horror genre and, bolstered by what is certain to be enthusiastic word-of-mouth, it should register uncommonly good grosses in those ballyhoo and drive-in markets where a vampire on the bill is a marquee asset. While the basic mood is comedic, director Bob Kelljan also manages to provide more raw horror than is customarily found in the most blatantly sadistic of horror thrillers. The station wagon murders of the earlier film

now take place on a gently rocking houseboat, with the slayings eerily reflected in rippling waters. Kelljan's off-beat style is neither bloody nor explicit in its carnage, and **THE RETURN OF COUNT YORGA** clearly indicates that he has become a major directorial talent. Kelljan and Yvonne Wilder are responsible for the screenplay, in which the values of good and evil are so perverted that audiences find themselves rooting for the deadly Count and his Yorga girls (a motley harem of giggling vampiresses). Yorga becomes enamored of Mariette Hartley, an incredibly sweet young thing who hangs about the local orphanage because



*Robert Quarry on the lunge as the definitive '70s vampire in AIP's THE RETURN OF COUNT YORGA.*





*Giacomo Rossi-Stuart heads an expedition to a planet that defines Spaghetti Sci-Fi in WAR BETWEEN THE PLANETS.*

she believes it keeps her close to purity. Alas, the Yorga domicile is next door. The friendly Count wants to put a little bite into her life, but he is too gentlemanly to initiate the girl without her consent and she is too dimwitted to realize the situation she is in. This thoroughly unsympathetic creature procrastinates so long that the gentle Count fails to make her his bride and she suffers a fate far worse. Robert Quarry is again the engaging bloodsucker and scene-stealer extraordinaire, Roger Perry is his rival in love, and outstanding in a generally excellent supporting cast are Miss Wilder, David Lampson and, in a hilarious cameo, George Macready. The economical production by Michael Macready is slick and completely professional, boasting very good camerawork by Bill Butler, appropriate background music by Bill Marx and nice Movielab Color.

1972. AIP. Movielab Color. 97 minutes. Robert Quarry, Mariette Hartley. Produced by Michael Macready. Directed by Bob Kelljan.

**THE RETURN OF COUNT YORGA** is available on VHS as part of MGM's Midnite Movies series.

## WAR BETWEEN THE PLANETS

Ballyhoo values and the title will make this Italian science-fiction import an OK dual bill entry for the kiddie trade and drive-ins. Drab and juvenile for mature sci-fi fans. Rating: G.

Its exploitable if inaccurate title, flashy ad campaign and G rating will put over this slow, drab and unconvincing mid-'60s Italian space opera in kiddie-dominated double feature markets and drive-ins. The Fanfare Films release, picked up from MGM, will be doubled with another Italian sci-fi epic, **SUPERARGO AND THE FACELESS GIANTS**, for probable solid business this summer. As entertainment, though, **WAR BETWEEN THE PLANETS** not only lacks excitement, it never even comes up with the promised war. Instead, the menace is a bright red living asteroid, described as "a body lacking in density and moving at too slow a speed." That about sums up the film itself, which looks cheap, takes forever to get going, and is filled with some of the flattest, most juvenile



dubbed dialogue since **WILD WILD PLANET** (1965), the last such entry from director Anthony Dawson (Antonio Margheriti). The planet's presence in the solar system is causing "floods, earthquakes and disasters" on Earth—which we see only as old tinted newsreel clips. "This thing is obviously determined to crash its way through the universe!" surmises wavyhaired, square-jawed Commander Rod Jackson (Giacomo Rossi-Stuart, Americanized as "Jack Stuart" in the credits), whose fearless team is dispatched into space by the United Democracies to get rid of the planet. Occasionally the spacemen venture out into the void, suspended on shamefully obvious wires, but mostly all they do is sit around the spaceship looking dour, worrying about Earth and sorting out the Commander's romantic problems. Finally, during the last 20 minutes, they land on the asteroid to plant anti-matter bombs, and a few crewmen get theirs from planet tentacles that spurt what looks like vegetable soup when severed. Unfortunately, they lose the primer needed to set off the bombs and a brave supporting actor has to sacrifice himself to blow up the planet. In case we miss any of the few meager plot details, after each scene a stentorian narrator carefully explains everything that happened. Special effects are decidedly unspectacular, and the miniatures look very miniature. Even the spaceship interiors are colorless—there's only one pitiful flashing light on the interstellar console. The cast mugs, postures and grimaces comically throughout, but the overall effect is still one of unrelieved tedium. The Metrocolor processing is often extremely grainy.

***Il pianeta errante.*** 1965, released 1971, Fanfare Films (Mercury-International Productions). Metrocolor. 80 minutes. Jack Stuart, Amber Collins, Jack Bertha, Marco Bogliani, Vera Dolen. Produced by Joseph Fryd and Anthony Margheriti. Directed by Anthony Dawson.

Some who attended matinees of **WAR BETWEEN THE PLANETS** were surprised to find themselves face-to-face with a movie that had been playing on American TV for years under the title **PLANET ON THE PROWL**. It was under this alternate title that the film was briefly released by Monterey Home Video in the 1980s.

## WITCHCRAFT '70

Weird, if faked, shockumentary doesn't live up to its promotional promises, but the ballyhoo angles are ample to garner good grosses for fast play-offs in drive-ins and action markets. Rating: X.

The undeniable appeal of "Unspeakable Cults! Bizarre Rituals! Erotic Rites!"—not to mention

"Actual Human Sacrifice on the Bloodstained Altar of Baal"—can be counted on to put over this fakey Mondo-Witchcraft documentary in action-ballyhoo situations and drive-ins. Fast play-offs and hard-sell are prerequisites to offset disappointed word-of-mouth reaction to the Trans American release, but lively grosses should be forthcoming on exploitation values alone. The newest effort from Luigi Scattini and the Italian producers of last year's **SWEDEN HEAVEN AND HELL** tries for shocking sensationalism but can't manage more than some half-hearted nudity, incantations and writhing around, overlaid with a listless narration telling how each sequence "is just one more sacrilege to add to the growing list." It opens and closes with some made-over additional US footage shot by R.L. Frost, including an interview with a police lieutenant on the lookout for drug-crazed hippie witches and warlocks in Centola, California. Then it's on to England and the first of several black mass rituals, each one duller than the last, though there are usually some naked acolytes on hand, at least. Once the ceremonies build to the inevitable "macabre orgies" promised in the ads, the narrator sanctimoniously suggests these are acts "which conscience dictates we shouldn't photograph," and so we don't get to see them. Other highlights include a Louisiana voodoo rite where "nudity is required of the participants so that the spirit of Gombala can pierce their flesh." The frenzied black dancers cavort with snakes, drink blood and eat what are supposed to be entrails before falling naked in an exhausted pile. "We weren't allowed to film the native rites of self-mutilation in Rio and Brazil," says the narrator, but luckily we purchased "8 millimeter home movies" of these events, mostly comprised of more writhing around on the ground, and shot from surprisingly sophisticated angles. Back in California, the "hidden camera" secretly films the presumed sensual ecstasies of hippie cultists who get naked on cue, drink blood and participate in mass rape while high on LSD and entrails. As seen from a discreet zoom-lens distance, everyone seems to be having a good time, and the lighting, hidden behind the bushes, is very professional.

***Angeli bianchi... angeli neri*** ("White Angel... Black Angel"). 1970. Trans American Films (P.A.C. Caravel Productions). Movielab Color. 82 minutes. Directed by Luigi Scattini and R.L. Frost.

Narrated by Edmund Purdom (and Alberto Bevilacqua in the Italian version), **WITCHCRAFT '70** has not yet had an official domestic video release. However, the title is available from mail order sources Midnight Video and European Trash Cinema.





~ *Reflections in a Haunted Eye* ~

*The Making of*  
**THE WATCHER  
IN THE WOODS**



*By Paul Talbot*

**THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS**

1980, Anchor Bay Entertainment,  
DD-6.1/DTS/MA/16:9/LB/+, \$19.98, DVD-1  
\$9.98 VHS Fullscreen, \$39.98 VHS

**I**n the late 1970s, the once-mighty Walt Disney Productions was desperately in need of a box office hit. The company's two theme parks were thriving, but years of lame, stale product had tainted the once-reliable Disney name and the film division had not enjoyed a major non-animated hit since 1969's **THE LOVE BUG**. Alienated by Disney's recent offerings, teenagers were buying tickets for more mature films while families and younger children stayed at home to watch television. In an attempt to reach a broader

audience, the studio launched a series of films that were branded with the previously taboo PG rating. While none of these films became the financial success that the company needed, several of them turned out to be quite unique and continue to have strong followings. One of the cult films produced during this period was John Hough's bizarre ghost story/science fiction hybrid, **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS**.

The film had its genesis in Florence Engel Randall's "Young Adult" novel *A WATCHER IN THE WOODS*. Randall (1917-1997) began publishing romantic short stories in the early 1960s and eventually moved on to the occult genre with the novels *THE PLACE OF SAPPHIRES* (1967), *THE ALMOST YEAR* (1971), and *THE HALDANE STATION* (1973). *A WATCHER IN THE WOODS* (1976), published by



Atheneum, demonstrated Randall's interest in the paranormal and told the story of a 15 year-old girl's search for another teenager who had vanished under mysterious circumstances years earlier. The girl eventually discovers that the missing teen has been trapped in an alternate universe, after having switched places with an alien child from another dimension.

Shortly after production, a copy of the novel fell into the hands of screenwriter Harry Spalding. Spalding had written a number of low-budget horror films in the 1960s, including **THE DAY MARS INVADED EARTH** (1962), **HOUSE OF THE DAMNED** (1963), **WITCHCRAFT** (1964), and **CURSE OF THE FLY** (1965). He later ended up at Disney, where he penned the James Garner Western **ONE LITTLE INDIAN** (1973) and the made-for-TV adventure yarn **THE SKY'S THE LIMIT** (1975). Spalding told interviewer Tom Weaver, "My wife Jean is a great mystery story reader, and one day she said to me, 'I think this novel *WATCHER IN THE WOODS* would be pretty good for Disney.' So I read it and she was right."

Spalding took the novel to producer Tom Leetch, who had been involved with the two previous Disney projects Spalding had scripted. Leetch, who had been at the studio since 1955 and began his career as an assistant director on such pictures as **SON OF FLUBBER** (1963) and **MARY POPPINS** (1964), moved up to co-producer status with the likes of **THE APPLE DUMPLING GANG RIDES AGAIN** (1979) and **THE NORTH AVENUE IRREGULARS** (1979)—two prime examples of the lame comedies that Disney had come to symbolize.

Leetch believed that *A WATCHER IN THE WOODS* told the kind of story that would attract a teenage/young adult audience. He told *STARLOG*'s David Houston, "I read the book and knew that this was the one story in a million that could make a good movie. The first problem was fear. Fear that there was no way I could sell Disney on making *WATCHER IN THE WOODS*."

Leetch pitched the project to Disney executive Ron Miller. Miller, a former football pro, had literally joined the Disney family in 1954 when he married Walt Disney's daughter, Diane. Miller began his career with the company as a member of the Disneyland construction crew, but before long he was working alongside his father-in-law

as co-producer on several hit features, including **THE MONKEY'S UNCLE** (1965), **THAT DARN CAT!** (1965), and **LT. ROBIN CRUSOE, U.S.N.** (1966) with Dick Van Dyke. Disney, who had no sons of his own, was fond of Miller and groomed him as his heir and successor. After Disney died in 1966, Miller continued to move up in the company and ultimately became executive producer of the studio's motion picture and television division.

Leetch explained, "I told Ron, 'This could be our **EXORCIST**, our **OMEN**.' He read the book and, fortunately, he responded almost as rapidly and totally as I did." Miller agreed to develop the property as a small budget project and appointed Leetch as the picture's co-producer. (Miller would receive the producer credit.) Disney bought the film rights to the novel, and Spalding was assigned to write the first draft.

## Pre-Production

**T**he two producers were heavily involved with the screenplay's development. "I was afraid that the Disney method would bring the scarier elements to such a simple level that it would vitiate all the effect," Leetch stated. "I knew that to make the story work, we had to retain all the jolts." Spalding's script followed the novel closely, but the trio had problems dealing with the title creature and the parallel dimension from which it came. "My feeling," Spalding stressed, "was that you couldn't show the audience the Watcher; you had to let them imagine it. They got caught in the trap of trying to show it." Miller insisted that, if the film was going to attract an older audience, it had to compete with the other contemporary shock films that were graphically depicting their horrors. The project soon stalled, but stayed in development at the studio for a couple of years.

In early 1979, Disney's determination to capture a teenage audience resulted in their first non-G-rated releases. The first, the high school wrestling drama **TAKE DOWN** (1979), was an independent pick-up which they distributed, which was soon followed by the **ANIMAL HOUSE**-inspired college comedy **MIDNIGHT MADNESS** (1980), which Disney actually produced. Both PG-rated pictures were released without the Disney name in the credits or advertising, yet still failed to attract teenagers. Meanwhile, the studio's ambitious and heavily-promoted \$20 million science fiction epic **THE BLACK HOLE** was released in late 1979 with both a PG rating and the Disney emblem.

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*Lynn-Holly Johnson is beset by disturbing images from the *Beyond* in John Hough's underrated Disney production, **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS**.*



Now feeling that *A WATCHER IN THE WOODS* fit into Disney's new direction, Miller greenlit the project with a hefty \$7.1 million budget and decided that the film would become the big Disney release for summer 1980. To maximize the budget, the studio opted to shoot the picture in England. American studios received tax breaks and production discounts by shooting abroad, and Disney had been producing movies in England since the company's first all-live-action feature, **TREASURE ISLAND** (1950).

Needing a British director for the project, Disney hired John Hough. Hough had begun his directing career on TV's *THE AVENGERS* in 1969 and soon moved on to a number of stylishly-directed features including the thriller **SUDDEN TERROR** (1970) with Mark Lester, Hammer's exceptional vampire thriller **TWINS OF EVIL** (1971), **TREASURE ISLAND** (1973, with Orson Welles), and 20th Century Fox's outstanding haunted house opus, **THE LEGEND OF HELL HOUSE** (1973). When Hough's 1974 chase film **DIRTY MARY CRAZY LARRY** became a big hit on the drive-in circuit, the director received more offers to direct more movies about fast cars, but decided instead to direct **ESCAPE TO WITCH MOUNTAIN** (1975) for Disney. The film, about the dangers experienced by two telekinetic alien children, went on to gross over \$9,000,000 and was one of the studio's few hits of the 1970s. Hough was retained by Disney to direct a sequel, **RETURN FROM WITCH MOUNTAIN** (1978)—which was less successful despite a cast including Bette Davis and Christopher Lee—and spent half a year supervising the pre-production of **THE BLACK HOLE** (turning over the reins to Gary Nelson) before leaving to helm MGM's post-WWII thriller **BRASS TARGET** (1978), starring Sophia Loren and Max von Sydow.

When the **WATCHER** project was moved to England, screenwriter Spalding didn't go with it. Spalding explained, "English directors always use English writers, in my experience. So I was *out* and they were *in*. I wound up with a co-credit on it, which was fine. I also kidded them that the least they could do was give my wife a finder's fee... which they laughed heartily about and changed the subject!"

Hough, having never read Spalding's original draft, suggested that Disney hire British screenwriter Brian Clemens to write the script. Clemens, best known for creating TV's *THE AVENGERS*, had written the screenplays for **AND SOON THE DARKNESS** (1970, which he also produced), **SEE NO EVIL** (1971), and **THE GOLDEN VOYAGE OF**

**SINBAD** (1974). He also wrote and produced the Hammer horrors **DR. JEKYLL AND SISTER HYDE** (1971) and **CAPTAIN KRONOS: VAMPIRE HUNTER** (1973, which he also directed). Working from the novel—with the close input of Miller, Leetch, and Hough—Clemens's draft had a very grim and creepy ambiance and strayed from the original story. In Randall's novel, the young girl disappears into the Watcher's dimension by entering a large tree trunk while walking through the woods. In Clemens' screenplay, the girl disappears while participating in an initiation ceremony in an old chapel. During the initiation, which takes place during a solar eclipse and a lightning storm, the chapel's large bell crashes down towards the girl, but the child disappears before it reaches her and she enters an alien universe.

As the script progressed, the filmmakers continued to struggle with how to depict the title creature on screen. Like Spalding, Clemens felt that the Watcher's physical appearance should only be implied. "I wrote the screenplay from a book," Clemens told interviewer Wheeler Winston Dixon, "but I thought the end was impractical, so I suggested an alternative ending. But [Disney] said, 'Oh no, this is what we want.' Disney's son-in-law, Ron Miller, was in charge at that point. [He] was a nice guy, but he really didn't know anything about making movies. So I said 'Look, this ending really isn't going to work,' but they insisted on it, so they shot it."

Hough discussed the troubled screenplay process in an interview with Christopher Koetting. "We had problems with the screenplay, and went back and forth on it," he remembered. "I have no doubt that, if we'd just stayed with Brian's original script, **WATCHER** would have been a very radical departure from the Disney mold. Brian's draft was darker and more sinister than what we ultimately shot, though much of the underlying structure of the piece is still his. The texture of the script was lightened in a second draft by Rosemary Anne Sisson, who made it a more amenable product for Disney." British writer Sisson had a good rapport with Disney, having recently penned the studio's English-lensed **RIDE A WILD PONY** (1976), **THE LITTLEST HORSE THIEVES** (1977), and **CANDLESHOE** (1977).

With the script being finalized by Sisson, Disney scheduled filming to commence in the summer of 1979, and assigned Hugh Attwooll as associate producer. Attwooll had held that position on all of Disney's British-made productions since 1959, including **KIDNAPPED** (1959), **IN SEARCH OF THE CASTAWAYS** (1962), and





*WATCHER* top-lines the great Bette Davis (seen here with Kyle Richards), who had previously worked with director Hough on *RETURN FROM WITCH MOUNTAIN*.

#### **THE SCARECROW OF ROMNEY MARSH** (aka **DR. SYN, ALIAS THE SCARECROW**; 1962).

By shooting in England, the studio greatly improved **WATCHER**'s chances of breaking away from the stale Disney mold of the 1970s. The studio's US productions had been using the same in-house camera and art departments since the 1960s, which ensured that all their films of this period shared the same dated, dull look.

British director of photography Alan Hume had been around the business since 1950. His resumé included Hammer's **KISS OF THE VAMPIRE** (1973), over a dozen of the "Carry On" comedies, including **CARRY ON SCREAMING!** (1966), and several Amicus productions, including **DR. TERROR'S HOUSE OF HORRORS** (1965) and the company's Edgar Rice Burroughs hits, **THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT** (1975) and **AT THE EARTH'S CORE** (1976). Hume had previously worked with Hough on **THE LEGEND OF HELL HOUSE**, and his effective lighting and camerawork for **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS** would equal that prior collaboration.

Production designer Elliot Scott's prior work on **THE HAUNTING** (1963)—the definitive haunted house movie—made him the perfect choice to design **WATCHER**. His other genre credits included **GORG0** (1961), **CHILDREN OF THE DAMNED** (1963), and **EYE OF THE DEVIL** (1967).

## **Casting**

**L**ending topline prestige to the picture, Disney cast Hollywood icon Bette Davis in the major supporting role of the eccentric Mrs. Aylwood. Davis, then 71, had been starring in movies since 1931, had won two Academy Awards and had been nominated for eight others. More than a decade after her "comeback" in Robert Aldrich's **WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE?** (1963), Davis often complained about the parts that were coming her way and why she felt compelled to accept them.

"Money!" she lamented in an interview. "It's the bane of my existence. Some people can never get it into their stupid, stupid heads that a star can work for fifty years and still not have any decent money put away. Certainly I don't! So I slave and slave and grub and grub and take a lot of perfectly terrible stuff for the money—and yes, the continued exposure."

But Davis had spoken kindly of the Disney studio while shooting her role as the lead villainess in Hough's **RETURN FROM WITCH MOUNTAIN**. "They treat you wonderfully well at Disney, a very pleasant atmosphere to work in, and the money is good," she said. "John Hough is an instinctive director." Hough and the star had gotten along well during the shoot, though they did clash at



one point when the director didn't want to use a double for a scene where Davis's character is hanging from a scaffold. Davis won the argument, and an unconvincing double was used. For her featured appearance in **WATCHER**, Davis received top billing and was provided with her own make-up person and hairdresser.

During pre-production, the ages of the two lead sister characters were raised from 15 and 7 to 17 and 10, allowing the studio to cast older actors who could work longer hours. For the lead role of Jan, the studio was interested in casting Diane Lane, who had recently made an impressive debut in George Roy Hill's coming-of-age drama **A LITTLE ROMANCE** (1979). But when Lane passed on the role, Lynn-Holly Johnson, another up-and-coming actress, was cast.

The 20 year-old Johnson had been an amateur ice skater for years before winning a national award in 1974. After a stint in the touring "Ice Capades" revue, she was cast as a blind skater in the 1979 tearjerker hit **ICE CASTLES** and received a Golden Globe nomination for "New Female Star of the Year." **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS** was only her second film, and the shoot required her to spend twelve weeks in England, after which her ice skating skills would be put to use again in the James Bond film **FOR YOUR EYES ONLY** (1981, also photographed by Alan Hume).

Cast as the younger sister Ellie was 10 year-old Kyle Richards, who had been chased by Neville Brand and his crocodile in Tobe Hooper's **EATEN ALIVE** (1976) and stalked by The Shape in John Carpenter's **HALLOWEEN** (1978). Kyle's older sister, Kim Richards, had been under contract to Disney and had worked with Hough on the "Witch Mountain" pictures; the Richards sisters had appeared together in the demonic auto classic, **THE CAR** (1977). Beloved by horror fans for her performances in three '70s horror classics, Kyle's customary charming performance in **WATCHER**, earned her a nomination for "Best Young Motion Picture Actress" from the 1980-1981 Youth in Film Awards.

Disney then cast two London-based actors, Carroll Baker and David McCallum, as the protagonist's parents. Baker had shot to stardom as the child bride in the controversial Elia Kazan/Tennessee Williams collaboration **BABY DOLL** (1956), which was followed by a number of important pictures, including **GIANT** (1956), **THE CARPETBAGGERS** (1964), and **CHEYENNE AUTUMN** (1964), but after a contract dispute lawsuit with Paramount, Baker was blackballed and unable to find work in Hollywood. She posed



*The inimitable David McCallum as the father of the Curtis brood, who disappears from the troubled film's final cut without explanation.*

semi-nude for the August 1968 issue of **PLAYBOY**, then moved to Europe where she headlined almost a dozen exploitation pictures, including the lurid Umberto Lenzi sex dramas **PARANOIA** (aka **ORGASMO**) and **A QUIET PLACE TO KILL** (both 1968), and the bizarre **KISS ME, KILL ME** [*Baba Yaga*, 1973] before returning to the US in 1976 to star in the shocking **ANDY WARHOL'S BAD**. Baker's controversial career made her a surprising choice to play the mom in a Disney movie.

McCallum had appeared in a number of major features, including **A NIGHT TO REMEMBER** (1958) and **THE GREAT ESCAPE** (1963), but he was best-known for starring with Robert Vaughn in the very popular NBC-TV series **THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.** (1964-68). After the series ended, McCallum devoted most of his time to theater but appeared in a great deal of television, most notably as the mentor in the two-part made-for-TV movie **FRANKENSTEIN: THE TRUE STORY** (1973). McCallum received third billing in **WATCHER**, but his role is thankless. His character is written out of the film when he leaves for a trip, halfway through the story, and never returns. In the novel, the father is a constant presence and he travels with his older daughter to the alien dimension.





*Carroll Baker was daringly cast as the mother of a wholesome Disney family, despite earlier credits like **BABY DOLL**, **ANDY WARHOL'S BAD** and **ORGASMO**.*

## Production

**A**s filming approached, Disney was still not happy with the troubled screenplay, and flew American screenwriter Gerry Day to England to make revisions. Day wrote for several TV series in the 1960s and 1970s, and had recently worked on the final draft of Disney's **THE BLACK HOLE**. Day revised **WATCHER**'s script during the principal photography in August and September, and her main duty was to rewrite the sisters's dialogue to make it sound more American. ("Neat-O!" was one of her contributions.) Although Day wrote much of the dialogue that appears in the final cut, she was not rewarded with a screen credit.

In addition to final script problems, the production team also had trouble with the weather. "The start date had to be put off three times," co-producer Leetch remembered. "We began, finally, in late summer and found ourselves watching the leaves begin to change."

Bette Davis was required to spend six weeks in England during production, although she was ultimately only needed for ten shooting days. "If I'm paid by the page, I will be broke by the end of this one," she quipped in her autobiography **THIS 'N' THAT**. Needing a new assistant, Davis had hired 22 year-old Kathryn Sermak in

June 1979. Sermak had no prior experience in the film industry, but she would go on to work for Davis until the star's death in 1989, receiving half of the legend's estate.

During **WATCHER**'s production, Davis and her assistant stayed in a suite at the Berystede Inn in London. The star spent her days off tending to the geraniums in the inn's garden and watching the people outside her window. "The days were not uneventful," Davis wrote. "One morning at six, as we came out of the hotel to leave for work, there was a flash of light. We had been caught by a photographer, whom we felt sure came from one of the London papers. We were right. Next day, on the front page of the **DAILY NEWS**, was the photograph, plus a headline which read: 'BETTE DAVIS DOESN'T GIVE A DAMN HOW SHE LOOKS.' I was incensed. What was I going to wear to work at six in the morning? A gold-lamé evening gown?" In response, the enraged star sent a pair of vicious letters to the paper.

While in London, Davis learned that she had been nominated for an Emmy for **STRANGERS: THE STORY OF A MOTHER AND DAUGHTER**, the 1979 television film co-starring Gena Rowlands. "I wanted badly to win that Emmy," Davis wrote. "I had asked B.D. [her daughter] to phone me in London if the news was good the night of the Emmy Awards. Around four in the morning, the phone rang. I picked up the receiver to be greeted with B.D.'s joyful shout: 'You won!' The producers were understanding enough to excuse me from the set the next day. I was a wreck from anxiety and no sleep."

Davis is a frightening presence in **WATCHER**'s early scenes with her dark wardrobe, thin and stringy hair, and pasty, skeletal face. Reportedly, the legendary star was not pleased with Lynn-Holly Johnson's acting in their scenes together and voiced her concerns to Hough. Johnson recalled in an interview with Zoe Alexander for **FEMME FATALES**, that "Miss Bette Davis... stayed in character all day, every day we were filming. If that meant that she was crabby, so be it; her character was supposed to be. She stayed to herself a lot, so she could remain focused."

The production team arranged to shoot exteriors at a number of impressive locations in England, including the enormous ivy-covered St. Hubert's Manor in Ivor Heath, Buckinghamshire, which was used for the outside of Mrs. Aylwood's house, the pond scene, and most of the forest scenes. When shooting interiors at the manor, the filmmakers had to work around the schedules of the two families residing in the estate.



The exteriors of John Keller's mansion and the outside of the chapel were shot at the massive, 45 acre Ettington Park Manor, a castle that had once belonged to King Edward II. The striking location, which had been used for several scenes in **THE HAUNTING**, was converted into a private resort shortly after filming was completed. The majority of the project's interiors were shot on sets constructed at the famous Pinewood Studios in London including, most importantly, the inside of the chapel where the initiation takes place.

Hough and director of photography Hume shot the picture in a widescreen (1.75:1) format using Panavision cameras. ("The aspect ratio for a spirited image is 1:75 to 1," according to the film's 1981 pressbook.) Hough's effective direction included his customary use of oddly-tilted low and high angles, wide angle lenses, forward and reverse zooms, and hand-held, subjective shots. The director explained, "I set out to frighten people by creating an atmosphere that was scarier than any other Disney film." Many of the film's exterior special effects were created on set. A series of fans were used to indicate the Watcher's unseen presence and the creature's blue electrical charges were created with kinetic lighting techniques.

When principal photography was completed in late September, the cast and crew moved on to other projects. Lynn-Holly Johnson and Alan Hume went on to Pinewood for **FOR YOUR EYES ONLY**, associate producer Hugh Attwooll scouted locations for the Disney comedy **CONDORMAN** (1981), and production designer Elliot Scott and his art department began work on the Disney/Paramount co-production **DRAGONSLAYER** (1981). In November, Davis began shooting the television film **WHITE MAMA** (1980). All of these pictures would be completed and released before **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS**.

## Post-Production

**W****ATCHER's** post-production was started in England, with Hough supervising the editing of Geoffrey Foot. Foot had been an editor since the early 1940s and his notable credits included several David Lean features, the cult TV series **THE PRISONER** (1967), and **DEATH LINE** (aka **RAW MEAT**, 1972). Foot had also successfully collaborated with Hough on **SUDDEN TERROR** and **THE LEGEND OF HELL HOUSE**.

Prolific Stanley Myers composed the atmospheric music score for **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS**. Myers listed the cult 1960s British

TV series **DOCTOR WHO** as an early credit. His list of feature scores included Michael Powell's **AGE OF CONSENT** (1969), **THE DEER HUNTER** (1978), and Joseph Strick's film versions of James Joyce's **ULYSSES** (1967) and **A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN** (1979). Five Pete Walker horror thrillers, including **HOUSE OF WHIPCORD** (1974), were among his less distinguished credits.

The recording and mixing of Myers' **WATCHER** score were done at Anvil Studios in Denham, England, a studio frequented by John Williams and Jerry Goldsmith. The soundtrack features a creepy music box motif and some screeching bird-like sounds that suggest both the tormented Watcher and the wounded animals seen in Colley's shack. Hough, pleased with Myers' music, worked with the composer again on his next feature, **THE INCUBUS** (1982). Myers scored over one hundred films before his death in 1993.

Disney had originally intended to complete the film's special effects-filled climax in England, but finding the top British effects artists tied up with **SUPERMAN II**, the studio decided to create the climactic appearance of the Watcher and the trip to the alien's planet at the home studio, back in Burbank. "Also, we just had not completed enough pre-production work on the sequence," admitted Leetch.

Hough would have no involvement with the film once it was brought back to the United States. "I had no control over the ending," he explained. "It was not put on until three months after I'd finished my cut."

Beginning in November 1979, Disney's in-house effects team began creating what came to be known as **WATCHER's** "Other World" sequence. The team consisted of most of the crew that had created the spectacular, Oscar-nominated effects for **THE BLACK HOLE**.

John B. Mansbridge, the head of the studio's very small art department, was named Art Director for the alien sequences. Mansbridge had worked on over 40 Disney features since 1962 and had received Oscar nominations for his work on **BEDKNOBS AND BROOMSTICKS** (1971) and **THE ISLAND AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD** (1974). Mansbridge worked closely with Leon R. Harris, who had just completed the art direction of **STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE** (1979), and was responsible for the storyboards and conceptual sketches for the Watcher's dimension.

The design of the Watcher itself was supervised by Joe Hale of the Disney animation department. Hale had been a layout artist for the studio's animated classics **SLEEPING BEAUTY**





*Jan Curtis (Lynn-Holly Johnson) visits a Hall of Mirrors that will show her unbidden reflections of another dimension.*

(1959) and **ONE HUNDRED AND ONE DALMATIANS** (1961) and had done animation effects for **RETURN FROM WITCH MOUNTAIN** and **THE BLACK HOLE**. Hale's **WATCHER** team included Henry Selick (who went on to direct **THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS** [1993] and **JAMES AND THE GIANT PEACH** [1996]) and Rick Heinrichs (who later became a production designer on **SLEEPY HOLLOW** [1999] and the remake of **PLANET OF THE APES** [2001]).

The Watcher design was sculpted in clay and turned over to Danny Lee, the head of the studio's Special Effects Department, who had also created the bullet squib effects for the famous climax of **BONNIE AND CLYDE** (1967). Lee explained the Watcher's rushed creation to interviewer David Hutchinson. "Time was so short that we had to start building the creature without any drawings or plans at all!"

Disney never released any stills of the creature, but Lee's description promised that audiences would be treated to a bizarre sight. "The spines on the back... have a sort of feathery look like you might see on a shrimp. The skull has a set of mandibles that are somewhat tusk-like. Folded up against the side of the head is a winglike, bony structure that unfolds in four sections. They stretch out to about nine feet and are used to engulf the girl. The eyes are illuminated nests of fiberoptic materials that can change color and pattern."

Standing almost ten feet high, the completed mechanical Watcher was built to accommodate a little person that could fit inside and manipulate the rig's movements. To make the creature appear as if it were floating, the creation was mounted on an off-camera crane. For other shots that needed to hide the crane, the Watcher was suspended from wires. A miniature version of the Watcher was also created for use in several shots. "They thought it would be nice to see him materialize," Lee recalled. "So we blew the miniature to pieces and then reversed the film so it appeared to come together before your eyes."

In the screenplay, the Watcher uses a transparent spaceship to travel between dimensions. For this sequence, Lee and his department built the interior and exterior of a miniature craft from fiberglass, plastic, and glass.

The Watcher's home planet was an elaborate miniature complete with numerous pyramids, clouds, and an electric river. David B. Mattingly, a young artist who had recently joined the studio in 1977, created the matte paintings for the sequence. Mattingly had painted mattes for **THE BLACK HOLE** and did some pre-production designs for American International's aborted **FLESH GORDON II**.

Art Cruickshank, the head of Disney's Special Photographic Effects department, first began at the studio in 1939 as an animation cameraman,





*Other discoveries await Jan underwater.*

and shot cels on such classics as **PINOCCHIO** (1940) and **FANTASIA** (1940). His non-Disney projects included **FANTASTIC VOYAGE** (1966, for which he won an Oscar) and the original **PLANET OF THE APES** (1968). Cruickshank shot the miniatures of the Watcher, the spaceship, and the alien landscape using the computerized ACES (Automated Camera Effects System) camera that had been originally created for the effects shots in **THE BLACK HOLE**.

Animation effects were added to enhance the sky and river on the Watcher's planet and were supervised by Jack and Jane Boyd. A studio animator since the mid 1940s, Jack Boyd had worked on numerous shorts and features, including **MARY POPPINS**. Sam Nicholson and Brian Longbotham created lighting effects for the planet's surface that were similar to the ones that they had provided for the first **STAR TREK** feature.

Designed to be an extremely intricate and ambitious three-minute special effects showstopper, the "Other World" sequence had the various artists working six days a week for over four months. Despite their best efforts, the general public would never see it.

By late March 1980, over \$175,000 had been invested in the Watcher effects and the "Other World" sequence. Many of the various effects shots were being composited, but the sequence was by no means finished.

And Disney was out of time.

## Promotion

**W**hile the effects artists struggled with the climactic sequence, Buena Vista—Disney's distribution arm—was busy planning the film's release pattern. **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS** was intended to be the major Disney release for the 1980 Spring/Summer season, and the marketing team decided to create a strong buzz for the picture by releasing it in an unusual manner. Instead of being given a wide, simultaneous national release, the picture would be distributed on a special limited basis before slowly spreading throughout the country.

"We have a great regard for this film and we want to sell it by word of mouth," said Buena Vista president Irving Ludwig in a **BOXOFFICE** article.

Disney did not protest when the film received a PG rating, but they knew that the film would have to be carefully marketed. The studio, having received complaints from parents and exhibitors who were not pleased with Disney's new direction, added a disclaimer on the posters and print ads for **WATCHER** that read: "Walt Disney Productions Strongly Recommends That Parents Pre-Screen This Picture. It Is Not For Small Children!" Meanwhile, advance trailers began with the crawl "Walt Disney Productions ushers in a new decade of motion picture entertainment with the following invitation to spend 90 minutes on the edge of your seat."



"We want to make sure parents are advised of its contents," explained Ludwig. "And we were careful not to buy any television time during children's morning shows."

"It's still a Disney film to me," added Disney Chairman Donn Tatum. "It is extremely suspenseful, but it doesn't rely on sheer horror, brutality or violence to achieve that high element of suspense."

As part of the film's advance publicity, a comic strip adaptation was syndicated to Sunday newspapers as part of the long-running King Features strip "Walt Disney's Treasury of Classic Tales." The strip's uncredited artist, who apparently was not provided with reference photos of the mechanical Watcher, drew the creature as a white, shrouded, ghostly figure. The adaptation ran for thirteen weeks, from March 2 to May 25.

Disney's promo campaign also included a movie tie-in paperback version of the original novel that was published by Scholastic Books and marketed to middle school and high school students. The paperback did not contain any photos from the film, but Disney commissioned a new painting for the cover, which also contained the heading "A New Thriller From Walt Disney Studios."

Studio expectations for **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS** ran so high that Buena Vista planned an elaborate benefit premiere for the film to take place on Wednesday, April 16, 1980 at the prestigious Ziegfeld Theater on West 54th Street in New York City. Built in 1969, the elegant Ziegfeld was designed with red carpet and gold trim and contained 1,131 plush seats. The theater was also equipped with an impressive sound system that could showcase the film's Dolby Stereo soundtrack.

**THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS** was to begin a four-week run at the Ziegfeld on Thursday, April 17, 1980. After playing at several other metropolitan theaters, prints would then be shown in movie houses in the New York suburbs. Following limited releases in Los Angeles and Chicago, the film would then play 600 theaters in a nationwide release in May and June.

Disney's extensive publicity for the film's premiere run included a full-page ad in *THE NEW YORK TIMES*. The ad campaign's key art featured atmospheric artwork by David J. Negron that depicted the faces of Bette Davis and the family surrounded by menacing trees and the arrogant tagline, "A Masterpiece of Suspense!"

The studio's publicity materials made the most of the fact that 1980 was Bette Davis' 50th year in films and claimed that **WATCHER** was her 87th film appearance. (Had anyone bothered to count,

they would have found it was actually her 85th feature, a rounder number.) During the week of the premiere, Disney put the star up in a suite at the Hotel Lambardy in Manhattan, where she made herself available to the press for interviews.

In addition to promoting the cast, the press kits contained a special section of credits for the "Other World" sequence and brief bios for the segment's key artists. The crew for this sequence was also listed in the end credit crawl of the premiere's print. But amazingly, the segment was not completed in time for the premiere and did not appear in the version screened at the Ziegfeld!

"When **WATCHER** made its debut in New York, we just weren't ready," recalled Leetch. "We were up against a deadline, but the visual illusions still needed time to evolve and ferment." The climax of the premiere's print showed Jan being enclosed in the wings of the Watcher, disappearing in a beam of light, then reappearing in the chapel accompanied by the missing girl. The print omitted Jan's trip to the Watcher's dimension and the escape of the trapped girl.

Matte artist David Mattingly lamented, "[Conceptual artist] Leon Harris had some really super things planned and very few of those were realized. I have some sad feelings about the picture, that it had great potential that was never fully realized."

"It wasn't until the premiere that I saw the monster, which was laughed out of the theater," recalled director Hough. "What they'd come up with was a batlike creature that descended into the scene like a giant black bird. It was kept onscreen too long, and it moved in an animated fashion that wasn't convincing. The audience had been quiet throughout the movie—there was real tension in the theater—but when this [thing] suddenly appeared, they fell about laughing."

## Release

**T**HE **WATCHER IN THE WOODS** opened to the general public the following day and was accompanied by scathing reviews from the city's top critics. Vincent Canby of *THE NEW YORK TIMES* wrote that the film was "a peculiar sort of Disney movie, in that it's likely to scare the daylights out of the very young while reducing their usually sober-sided elders to unfortunate giggles. The audience in between may well enjoy the standard spook-movie effects, but I challenge even the most indulgent fan to give a coherent translation of what passes for an explanation at the end. The movie's metaphysics, bogus anyway, are not helped by the



appearance of a creature that looks as if it had been stolen from a Chinese New Year's parade."

VARIETY's critic claimed that "The film almost turns into '**THE CHANGELING** Goes to Disneyland'... Whatever is out there... remains undiscovered even after the film has ended... Mostly it's left to the viewer's individual imagination what makes up the mystery."

Kathleen Carroll of THE NEW YORK DAILY NEWS called the film an "... ultimately ridiculous suspense movie... it offers only a garbled explanation as to just what this creature is who likes to spy on young girls, particularly blonde teenagers... this Walt Disney production proved to be much too complex for my poor brain..."

Lawrence J. Quirk of QUIRK'S REVIEWS drew attention to the incompleteness of the final reel, demanding to know "What kind of undisciplined, self-indulgent production sloppiness is this?"

But most vicious of all was Rex Reed's NEW YORK DAILY NEWS review, which began with the headline "DISNEY DESTROYS DAVIS." Reed called the picture "a horror movie in more ways than one, none of them worth repeating... Like most Disney films, [it] has been poorly directed and abysmally scripted... I won't be so churlish as to give the mystery away on the assumption that some fool might actually be considering an admission ticket to this hogwash. But I will add that the mystery is never solved, and what results in the end is less scary than it is hilarious... There's an eclipse, a séance, and something like the Cookie Monster that appears from the woods resembling one of the talking apple trees in **THE WIZARD OF OZ**."

Word of mouth had its effect. The film did poor business at the Ziegfeld, and Buena Vista pulled the film on May 2, in the third week of its scheduled four-week run. The reliable classic **FANTASIA** was put in its place, and **WATCHER** was brought back to the studio for reevaluation. Buena Vista president Irving Ludwig told BOXOFFICE, "People who saw the film in New York were very open in saying that they were disappointed in the ending. It was not what they had expected. We were concerned... and decided we would make the ending a little more reasonable."

## Reshoots

**D**isney prepared a new cut of the film that included a rough version of the "Other World" sequence and screened it for a test audience comprised of children aged nine to eighteen. This revised version was also screened for

theater exhibitors in seven states. "Comment cards indicated that they liked the picture, but still did not enjoy the way it ended," Ludwig recalled. "It was then that Ron [Miller] decided that we should make repairs."

Disney had suffered the same problem four months earlier with their other big release. **THE BLACK HOLE**'s climax (which also featured a trip through a strange dimension) had left audiences confused and frustrated and was a major reason for the film's disappointing box office performance.

Ron Miller, determined to turn **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS** into a hit, decided to delay the national release and create a new ending for the film. "We felt we had seven-eighths of a good picture," co-producer Leetch told the press. "But the ending confused people."

On May 20, the studio cancelled the 600 playdates that were to be in effect by June 7. To placate the exhibitors, who had booked the picture and had advance one-sheets hanging in their lobbies, Disney reissued **MARY POPPINS** a full year ahead of schedule. The reissue did well, unlike the studio's new summer release, **THE LAST FLIGHT OF NOAH'S ARK**, a lousy PG adventure with Elliot Gould.

Cancelled along with the playdates was a publicity tour that would have sent Carroll Baker to several major cities to promote the film. Special press kits had been printed to advertise the tour, and, remarkably, Disney's publicists included **ANDY WARHOL'S BAD** and **ORGASMO** in the star's list of credits!

When the costly "Other World" sequence was removed from the film, **WATCHER**'s post-production crew was reassigned to other projects. Co-producer Leetch went back overseas to co-produce **NIGHT CROSSING** (though he continued to be involved with **WATCHER**), and animator Joe Hale began producing the studio's ambitious and expensive 70mm animated epic **THE BLACK CAULDRON** (1985).

Some insiders at Disney felt that the studio had made a fatal strategic mistake by opening the film in New York. Few recent Disney pictures had received good reviews from the New York press, and the typical New Yorker was not the studio's target audience.

Miller, hoping to have the revised film in theaters by October 1980, instructed several in-house writers to come up with ideas for a new ending. Miller expected to spend \$500,000 on the new climax and made plans to reunite the cast in England. Fortunately, the chapel set had been put in storage at Pinewood and had not been destroyed.





*Huge wind machines were turned on actress Lynn-Holly Johnson during the climax of **WATCHER**, while other departments at Disney tried to figure out what was actually happening in the scene.*

Miller called on Harrison Ellenshaw, one of the industry's top effects artists, to design a new ending for the film. Ellenshaw was the son of the legendary Oscar-winning effects artist Peter Ellenshaw, who had created matte paintings and other optical effects on over two dozen of the studio's classic pictures since 1948, and had recently retired after **THE BLACK HOLE**. The younger Ellenshaw had joined the studio in 1971 and was named head of the matte department two years later. After **THE BLACK HOLE**, Harrison Ellenshaw took an outside job supervising the extensive mattes for **THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK** (1980) and was not involved with **WATCHER**'s elaborate first attempt at an ending.

Ellenshaw viewed the film and was hard on his Disney co-workers. "They had tried to blend science-fiction with a ghost story and it didn't work," he told *THE NEW YORK TIMES*. "They tried to get a scary alien, but he came out looking like a large lobster with seaweed hanging off him. It was as though the audience had wandered into another picture. You can't break the rules that late in a movie without having the audience feel someone got the last reel mixed-up."

Finally agreeing with the suggestions that had been made by original screenwriters Spalding and Clemens, Miller decided to not actually show the Watcher on screen. As Brian Clemens recalled, "They released it and found out that it didn't work,

so they pulled it, brought in another writer, and told him to tack on the ending that I'd suggested in the first place."

A new ending was written that depicted Ellie, the younger sister, as being briefly possessed by the alien. The creature would communicate through the girl and its dialogue would attempt to explain the plot to the audience. (In the original version, Ellie did not appear at all in the chapel climax.) The effects would be limited to flashing ectoplasm that accompanied the possessed girl's appearance in the chapel and a blast of glowing light that represented the portal to the other dimension. The trip to the alien planet would be completely eliminated.

Although the new ending was ready to be shot, the shooting was delayed when the Screen Actors Guild voted to go on strike in July. With the film's American actors not allowed to work for the duration of the strike, Miller's plan for an October release fell through.

When the SAG strike ended in October 1980, the cast from the final séance sequence was brought back to Pinewood to shoot on the reconstructed set, over a year after the picture had originally wrapped. By then, director John Hough was committed to helming the very un-Disneylike occult thriller **THE INCUBUS** and was unavailable to direct the new climax, so Disney recruited one of their contracted directors—Vincent McEveety,



best-known for zany Disney comedies like **MIL-LION DOLLAR DUCK** (1971) and **SUPERDAD** (1974)—to supervise. McEveety's work on Disney's **TREASURE OF MATECUMBE** (1976) and episodes of **THE FUGITIVE**, **STAR TREK**, and **KOLCHAK: THE NIGHT STALKER** demonstrated that he could also handle suspense. Though he was an American, McEveety's participation in the reshoots did not affect the project's tax break status because a British director had shot the majority of the picture.

Likewise, Alan Hume not available to photograph the new material and had to be replaced by Godfrey A. Godar, the production's second unit cameraman. Godar, the cinematographer for the English language footage added to complete Bruce Lee's unfinished **GAME OF DEATH** (1978), did a good job of matching Hume's lighting for the original chapel footage. He would work with Hough again on **HOWLING IV: THE ORIGINAL NIGHTMARE** (1988).

At age 11, Kyle Richards had noticeably grown since principal photography, but fortunately had retained her long hair. Carroll Baker had appeared in the original climax, but she was not brought back for the reshoots and her character was deleted altogether from the final scene. English actress Katherine Levy, who had played the trapped girl in the original climax, was replaced

in the revisions by an uncredited actress with a different-colored, more realistic wig, although Levy and her white hairpiece are still seen in the final film during Johnson's "visions."

The film originally ended with an epilogue set at Mrs. Aylwood's cottage that depicted Bette Davis' character being reunited with her missing daughter. The epilogue (which contained dialogue by Jan describing her trip in the spaceship and attempting to explain the girl's disappearance) was removed from the film. The new version would have Mrs. Aylwood embracing her daughter in the chapel immediately after the girl's reappearance. Davis, who had just begun shooting the TV film **FAMILY REUNION** (1981, her third TV movie since **WATCHER**'s original shoot), was unavailable to return to Pinewood for the reshoots, so a limping double was used in a long shot. In early 1981, when she became available, Davis spent a few hours shooting inserts at the Disney studio in Burbank. The re-shot Davis material that appears in the final film amounts to one camera set-up split up into two shots. The set and lighting that surround the actress do not match the rest of the scene.

In Burbank, after the footage with the actors had been re-shot, Harrison Ellenshaw completed the subdued opticals for the final sequence with the assistance of visual effects artists Dick Kendall

*Mrs. Aylwood (Bette Davis) is reunited with her long-lost daughter in the film's eventual ending, one of several post-production reshoots.*





and Don Henry and camera effects artist Bob Broughton. Broughton had been with Disney since 1937 when he did special photographic effects for **FANTASIA**. Soon after finishing **WATCHER**, Ellenshaw, Broughton, and Kendall began work on the astonishing visuals for Disney's **TRON** (1982). While Art Cruickshank and David Mattingly retained screen credits on **WATCHER**'s new version, the only apparent remnants of their contributions are several shots of the eclipse. The final cost of the revisions reportedly came to \$1 million—double what Ron Miller had originally predicted.

Along with the film's epilogue, Disney also deleted a pre-credit prologue that began with a little girl walking through the forest while clutching a doll. An unseen force slams the doll into a tree and the child runs screaming from the woods as the doll catches fire. Intended to show the Watcher's frustration at not being able to communicate, the sequence confused audiences and was removed from the revised version. (Kathleen Carroll's review had complained that the film "completely ignores the fate of the little girl who appears in the opening sequence.")

In addition to removing three entire sequences, the studio also shortened a number of scenes to improve the picture's overall pace. (In several over-the-shoulder shots in the final film, it is obvious that an actor's lips are moving but no dialogue is coming out.) The running time of the new version came to 83m 16s. The press kit for the original release listed a running time of 108m, but this must have been an estimate on the studio's part, since the "Other World" sequence had not been completed when the press kit was prepared. (The review in *VARIETY* listed the original's running time as 100m.)

## Re-Release

**A** *two-page trade ad* in the February 1981 issue of *BOXOFFICE* promoted the studio's line-up for the year and exclaimed that "**THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS** has it all—from a spine-tingling plot to a classic Hitchcock-style ending."

Disney arranged to release the revised film regionally in October 1981 with a distribution plan similar to the original showcase release strategy. Striking a limited number of prints, the studio decided not to give the film a wide release, but to concentrate on a small number of cities, then move the prints into other limited areas.

Disney discarded the film's original key art and came up with a new print campaign that had a ghostly outline of a face peering through a series of gnarled trees. The improved tag line read, "It Was Just An Innocent Game Until A Young Girl Vanished... for Thirty Years!" The Walt Disney Productions presentation credit was discreetly buried in the billing block, while the studio's new trailers made no mention of the brand name.

The film's new pressbook touted the almost two-year-old Scholastic paperback tie-in and encouraged theater owners to order **WATCHER IN THE WOODS** balloons to hand out to children. ("Your campaign will be off to a flying start when every child in town is waving your theater-imprinted balloon!") The pressbook also contained a coloring sheet that could be mass duplicated and used for a coloring contest. ("Distribute [them] in schools, playgrounds and everywhere kids congregate.") Featuring the artwork from the original campaign, the balloons and the coloring sheets seemed ill-suited for a film that was originally announced as "not for small children."

On October 9, a year and a half after the ill-fated New York premiere, **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS** was released to 240 theaters in regions limited to Boston, Washington, Richmond, Salt Lake City, and North Carolina. Sparse television and radio ads helped to promote the picture. The revised picture received some surprisingly good reviews during its release. A critic for *THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER* praised the new version and called it "a rattlingly good suspense yarn."

Carole Kass of *THE RICHMOND-TIMES DISPATCH* approved of the new ending and wrote, "The original left viewers confused. Now, there is no question left; the ending is seamless, satisfying, resolving the mystery. The film is genuinely eerie and scary... members of the audience squealed in terror... It is a well-made film, which succeeds in its suspenseful scare tactics. And it is much better than its quiet, poorly promoted release would lead one to expect."

David Linck of *BOXOFFICE* didn't agree. "The new ending... is neither an intriguing or flashy finale. The company shouldn't have bothered... For all of the magic Disney has up its sleeve, this film is virtually devoid of innovative special effects and wizardry... Disney is being 'out-Disneyed' by the competition..."

The *BOSTON GLOBE*'s Michael Blowen was equally unimpressed, calling the film "a disappointing movie that conjures up ghost story clichés that I thought were buried years ago... Everything in the film—direction, acting, writing,





*This demonic apparition was laughed off the screen at the NYC premiere, and was subsequently cut from the film. The footage is included as a supplement in Anchor Bay's new DVD.*

music arrangements, and editing—is as transparent as Casper the Friendly Ghost.”

Bette Davis would also speak unfavorably about the film whenever an interviewer would bring it up. She called the film “unfortunate” and defended her own performance by claiming that she felt obligated to “play the damned thing larger than life to keep what audience there was from leaving the theater!”

The film grossed a decent \$1.2 million during its first week of limited release and lasted over a month at many of the houses where it was playing. It was soon released to other areas of the country, but failed to recoup its budget. **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS**’ subtle chills had no chance of attracting the teenagers that were devouring such R-rated shockers as **FRIDAY THE 13TH PART 2**, **AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON** and **HALLOWEEN II** (all 1981). From a financial standpoint, the studio may have had less to lose by simply proceeding with the release of the original version as planned.

**THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS** was made available to the foreign market the following year, turning up in England in 1982 and Hong Kong in 1983. The excellent poster for the British and French markets prominently featured the studio’s name over the title, but the tag line warned Disney fans that “It Is Not A Fairy Tale!” Mexican advertising material featured the same key art that had been designed for the aborted 1980 release.

Disney continued to release a stream of flops throughout 1982 and 1983, including a costly adaptation of Ray Bradbury’s **SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES** (1983), but the studio finally had a much-needed smash hit in 1984 when the Tom Hanks comedy **SPLASH** was released under the newly created Touchstone Pictures imprint. Later in the year, Ron Miller was replaced by Michael Eisner and Frank Wells, and the rest is history. The new Disney would soon have phenomenal success with a string of high-grossing hits (including several Touchstone releases that were R-rated.)

## Rediscovery

**A**fter being ignored during its theatrical releases, **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS** started to develop a cult following when the film was released on Beta and VHS in late 1982. When Disney first entered the burgeoning home video market, all of their releases had the same generic cover design on a white clamshell case. The lower half of the cases would have the film’s title and a still, while the top half featured the Walt Disney Home Video logo, accompanied by a picture of Mickey Mouse as the Sorcerer’s Apprentice. Since the image of Mickey and the familiar Walt Disney “signature” took up fifty percent of the box, most storeowners automatically stuck all Disney releases



in the Children's section. Misplaced in the kiddie aisle, many of the studio's latter-day titles, like **THE BLACK HOLE**, **TRON**, and the Matt Dillon teen drama **TEX** (1982), got overlooked by their target audience.

Most video-renting adults would grab anything with the Disney logo and assume that it was safe for kids to watch. This led to **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS** being unwittingly shown to terrified young children in schoolrooms and day care centers. The film's frequent showings on cable via The Disney Channel exposed the picture to more frightened families. As evidenced by many enthusiastic Amazon.com reviews, **WATCHER** introduced many young people to the horror genre, and the film continues to have a strong following, particularly among women who first saw it when they were pre-teens. Noted genre historian William K. Everson discussed the film in his 1986 book *MORE CLASSICS OF THE HORROR FILM*. While conceding that "the plot is frankly a little hard to fathom," Everson also called the film "visually spooky" and "atmospherically superb (not pulling its punches, as one expects a Disney film to do)." After re-watching the film on British television in 1985, Everson called it "a remarkably effective film for the TV medium. Not knowing quite what is going on or why, or if the characters are indeed what they seem to be, creates an uneasy feeling in the isolation of one's living room, quite different from the shared confusion in a movie theater."

Walt Disney Home Video reissued the film on VHS in the early 1990s with a new slipcase that featured the artwork from the film's 1981 theatrical release. Released at the same time was a laserdisc containing no extras. All of Disney's video releases of the title contained a weak transfer of a worn-looking print.

In 1998, Anchor Bay Entertainment re-released the digitally remastered film on VHS in two editions. The standard edition featured a pan&scanned image and came in a slipcase that sported the 1981 poster artwork. The "Collector's Edition" was in widescreen (1.85:1) with a clamshell cover that had the 1980 key art on one side and liner notes and photos on the other. Each version contained the 1981, 84m cut. (The "Collector's Edition" is currently out of print.)

In July of 1999, Anchor Bay Entertainment announced an elaborate two-disc DVD Special Edition of **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS** that would include the original premiere version, the revised version, the "Other World" sequence, a

John Hough commentary, and numerous other extras. Scheduled for release in Fall 1999, the Special Edition DVD was inexplicably cancelled by Disney at the last minute and repeatedly delayed. Finally, a scaled-down, single-disc DVD was released by Anchor Bay in April 2002. The THX-certified disc includes a definitive rendering of the film itself, presented in a gorgeous anamorphic transfer (1.81:1) with a rousing stereo surround sound mix presented in Dolby and DTS options. Unfortunately, as with the film's original release, the disc fails to live up to its advance ballyhoo; it does not contain the original premiere version as initially promised, nor does it contain any footage from the original prologue, and the supplements are less far-reaching than they might have been. Two alternate endings are included, both featuring the bizarre Watcher and one containing a rough, incomplete version of the "Other World" sequence. Other extras include four excellent trailers (two from the 1980 aborted campaign and two from the 1981 release), a disappointing Hough commentary, and a 20-page color booklet with several behind-the-scenes photos and six brief, but informative, interviews. Anchor Bay has also released the film on VHS in cropped and widescreen editions.

Anchor Bay's relationship with Disney is curious. The label has released many of the studio's lesser-known films on VHS and DVD, but the Disney name appears nowhere on the covers' summaries or lists of credits and the Buena Vista logo is usually omitted from the opening credits. **THE HAPPIEST MILLIONAIRE** (1967) was the last feature personally supervised by Walt Disney, but Anchor Bay's release of that film's long-lost Roadshow Edition does not mention the famous producer's name on the cover or in the liner notes. Apparently, Anchor Bay is forbidden to exploit, or even mention, the Disney name. (Significantly, **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS** is the first Anchor Bay Disney release to feature the Buena Vista logo before the feature, substantial supplements, and a commentary track.)

The late 1970s and early 1980s are often referred to as a dark time for Walt Disney Productions. Many of the films produced during that period were ignored and are now forgotten. It was a time of experimentation and, judging by critical and popular acceptance, the experiments were failures. But **THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS** and several other films mentioned in this article have survived to become cult classics and stand up as some of the most unusual and exceptional films in the Disney library.







# Harry Potter



*Reviewed by Rebecca & Sam Umland*

## **HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE**

2001, Warner Home Video (LB & P&S versions), DD-5.1/16:9/LB/ST/CC/+, \$26.99, 152m 9s, DVD-1

## **HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE**

2001, Warner Home Video (Widescreen), DD-5.1/16:9/LB/ST/CC/+, £22.99, 146m 6s, DVD-2 (PAL)

We have read no complete accounts of why HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE is known throughout the world by this title, except in North America, where it was published (and subsequently released in its filmed version) as HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE. We do know that when Scholastic purchased the US rights to J.K. Rowling's novel, it changed the title—and also purportedly some of the language to make it “less British.” We suspect that this title alteration was due to the pervasive anti-intellectualism in America, where publishers—and later, producers—feared that the word “philosopher” in

the title might cause readers (and later, audiences) to stay away in droves. Ironically, the substitution of “sorcerer” has only heightened the paranoid reaction of conservative groups that want the book (and the film) banned because they claim it promotes the dark arts, fostering an unhealthy belief in magic and the occult.

The first Harry Potter film has proved to be as popular and lucrative financially as the novel upon which it is based. In this instance, the success of the film is, in part, due to the fact that it follows its literary source very closely, while also taking advantage of the best that a skillful cinematic transposition can offer: great visual effects, outstanding sets and location shots, and a strong cast. First and foremost, the novel HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE derives its strength from its archetypal story and characters,

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*Daniel Radcliffe sure plays a mean handball as the young wizard in HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE.*



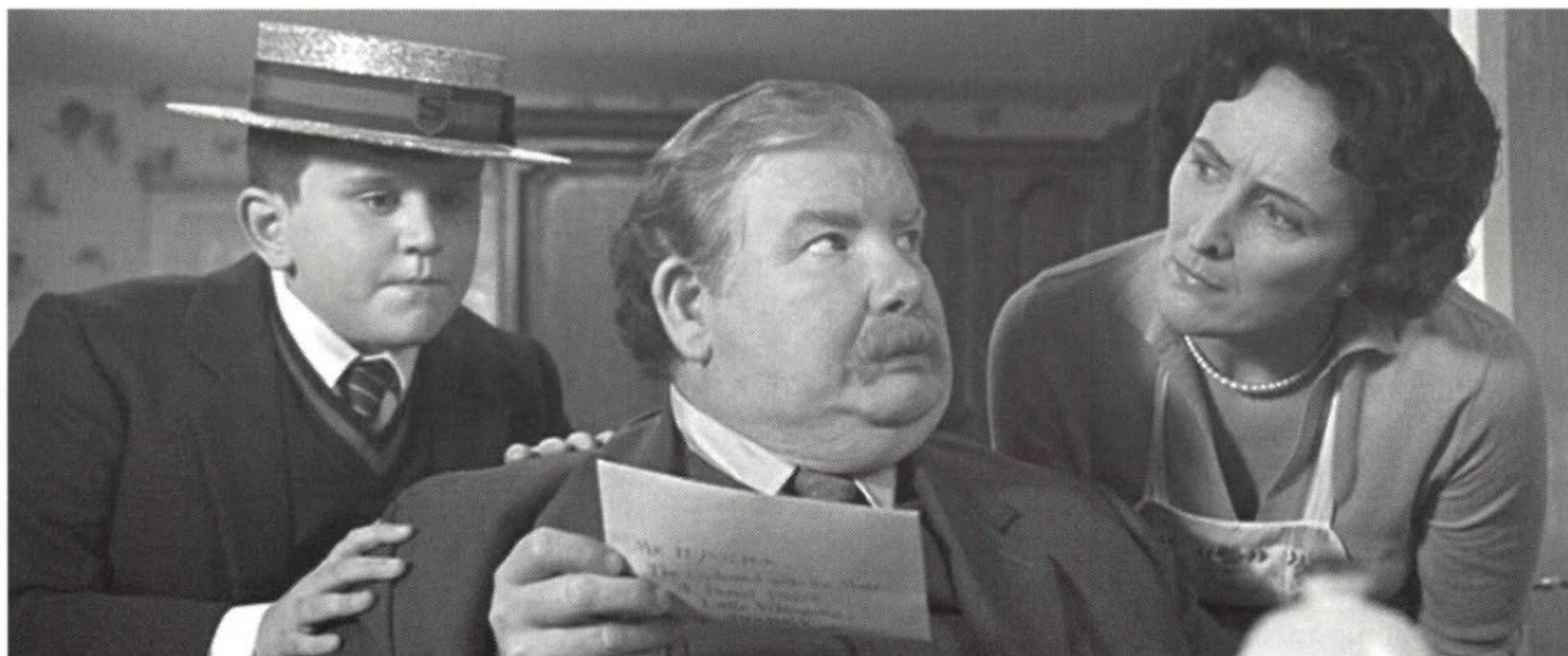
which makes it transcend the boundaries of culture, gender and age. It features the familiar mythic plot of the hero whose origins are, at first, obscure, whose election becomes apparent through supernatural signs when he reaches puberty, and whose struggle against Evil will determine the fate of an entire world. His nemesis is his *doppelgänger*, a powerful anti-hero whose considerable talents are subverted by evil, an evil that can be exiled but never quite vanquished. King Arthur, Luke Skywalker, or Harry Potter... Mordred, Darth Vader, or Voldemort: the essential story never loses its appeal.

The film remains true to the story in virtually every detail, and even the omissions made for the sake of time are very few. Other reasons why both the book and film have enjoyed such phenomenal success are its fully-realized, compelling characters. The story also offers an alternate reality with utopian elements, one that co-exists (and apparently always *has*, as a sign in Diagon Alley reads "Olivander's: Fine Wands Since 304 B.C.") with the ordinary, flawed "Muggle" world. Like most utopian works that point to a wicked technocratic world, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry offers a reality in which magic—both good and bad—replaces technology. At Hogwarts, ink and quills replace computers, fireplaces instead of furnaces provide warmth, and not even the lights are electric. Hogwarts also employs its inversions of ordinary reality: chocolate is dispensed in the infirmary as frequently as penicillin in a hospital. To its credit, though, **HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE** doesn't offer a sugar-coated world in which Evil turns out to be just a sham: there is real danger, true malevolence and, as

Dumbledore sadly urges upon Harry at the book's conclusion, Evil cannot be eradicated, only contained. Voldemort will return, and the forces of good must thus be ever vigilant.

Fans of J.K. Rowling's book were not disappointed in **HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE**. Although several directors were considered—among them Stephen Spielberg and Terry Gilliam—the task ultimately went to Chris Columbus (**HOME ALONE**), who didn't mind Rowling's iron hand in terms of casting decisions (she refused to allow an actor who was non-British to be cast in the part of Harry, which is allegedly why Spielberg dropped out). The screenplay was competently written by an enthusiastic Steve Kloves (**WONDER BOYS**), who saw eye-to-eye with Rowling. Following the book's plot and characters closely, the film used outstanding location shots in the UK, which breathed life into it. And in addition to its fidelity to the novel and its stunning location shots, the success of **HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE** must be credited to the extraordinary ensemble of actors. Veterans Maggie Smith as a meticulous Professor McGonagall, Richard Griffiths (who played the inimitable Uncle Monte in **WITHNAIL AND I**) as Harry's cruel Uncle Vernon, Alan Rickman as the grim and mysterious Professor Snape, and Richard Harris as head wizard Albus Dumbledore, all turn in excellent performances. Yet the most difficult casting decision was, as one might expect, the part of Harry himself. Columbus, who had seen Daniel Radcliffe in a BBC production of the Dickens classic, **DAVID COPPERFIELD**, wanted him, but met resistance from Radcliffe's parents. (Radcliffe might also be recognized for his part in

*Richard Griffiths as Uncle Vernon, with family, deciding Harry's fate.*







*Harry offers a friendly perch to his pet owl (and mail carrier), Hedwig.*

John Boorman's **THE TAILOR OF PANAMA**). The two remaining child actors in lead roles as Harry's friends at Hogwarts, Rupert Grint as Ron Weasley and Emma Watson as Hermione Granger, proved to be good matches for Radcliffe. The show-stealer, however, is the inimitable character of Rubeus Hagrid (Robbie Coltrane), the half-giant and groundskeeper at Hogwarts who, throughout Harry's adventures, functions as his fairy godparent. Additional cameos by John Cleese as the ghost, "Nearly Headless Nick," add to the already considerable humor of the film.

The look of the film should also be credited to Columbus and production designer Stuart Craig, who wanted to contrast the quotidian world of the Muggles with that of the fantastic world of magic, represented primarily by Hogwarts School. The world in which Harry spends his early life (London) is shot in drab grays, while the world of Hogwarts—visible as soon as Hagrid leads Harry out of the familiar world, through the tavern of the Leaky Cauldron and into Diagon Alley—is colorful and animated. The characters to whom Harry is introduced in the Leaky Cauldron appear to have stepped out of a 19th Century Dickens novel, but the wonder Harry experiences when he first steps foot in Diagon Alley, where he must purchase his school supplies (wands, robes, cauldrons, quills), is shared by astonished viewers. The crowded street boasts antiquated shop signs and characters wearing long robes, cloaks, and top hats, while sporting sideburns and whiskers, assures us that they belong to the London of another

era. The hustle and bustle conveys an energy lacking in the modern day London business district through which Hagrid has just led Harry. Apparently, this reference to Dickens is deliberate: Columbus acknowledged that he had been inspired by two works by director David Lean, **GREAT EXPECTATIONS** (1946) and **OLIVER TWIST** (1948), for the drab and dreary Muggle sequences. For the colorful world of magic, he used the rich Technicolor look of **OLIVER!** (1968) and **THE GODFATHER** (1972). The Dickens influence, referenced in the musical **OLIVER!**, based on **OLIVER TWIST** (also represented by Radcliffe's prior role as David Copperfield), shows up in Rowling's novel and subsequently the film in the theme of the vulnerable child (often an orphan) being taken advantage of by predatory adults and being forced to grow up in a corrupt, jaded world of commerce. The success of **HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE**, then, derives from its classic story and archetypal characters, from its stunning sets and location shots which show a fidelity to the source novel, and from the tireless efforts of Chris Columbus and his shrewd casting decisions. Columbus has also finished directing the second Harry Potter film, **HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS**, due out in November 2002.

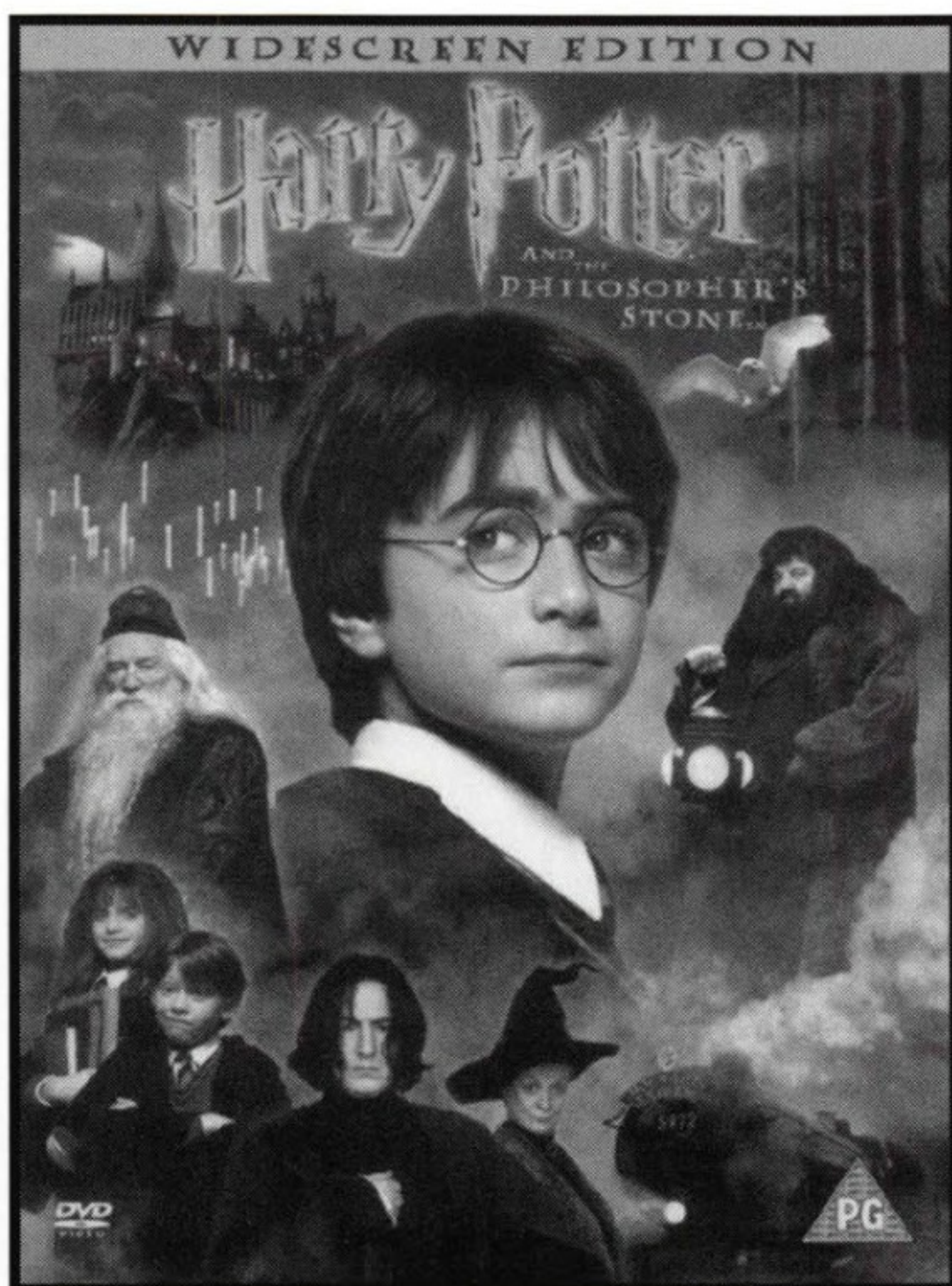
Warner's widescreen edition picture is letterboxed at approximately 2.35:1 with 16:9 enhancement. The transfer is crisp and colorful, with good contrasts and stable blacks. Although Warners issued some prints in DTS





*Richard Harris as head wizard Albus Dumbledore, plus a look (below) at the mucho collectable import DVD release.*

in selected theaters, Warner Home Video has opted to issue the film on DVD only in DD-5.1. The soundtrack is fine, though the sound tends to stay in the front channels and is not profoundly detailed or elaborate. The alternate Spanish soundtrack is also presented in DD-5.1. The film has been accurately closed-captioned with optional subtitles in both English and Spanish.



The UK edition contains the same features as the US domestic widescreen edition, with minor exceptions. In contrast to the domestic issue, for instance, the DVD-2 PAL release contains subtitles in English and Arabic. Otherwise, the two are virtually identical (the title excepted, of course) with different cover art, but minor variations in the art on the interior sleeves (the disc art is precisely the same). Both features have been allotted a healthy 35 chapter stops, and the scene selections are titled precisely the same. The 1m 48s teaser trailer, the 2m 20s theatrical trailer, and cast and crew bios fill out the supplements on the first disc.

Disc 2 contains additional materials, including approximately 10m of deleted and expanded scenes, accessed through a series of tests in the Classrooms section. Self-navigated interactive tours take the viewer to Diagon Alley, through Hogwarts' Great Hall, attend its Classrooms, visit Harry's Room and Hagrid's cottage, and the Library (where, yes, the books scream, the pictures talk, and ghosts roam the aisles). The second disc also contains the 16m 23s "Capturing the Stone: Interviews with the Filmmakers," containing the requisite conversations with the filmmakers about adapting Rowling's highly imaginative novel to the screen, and also some remarks about the next film in the series. Within a book in the Library section one can find artwork and production sketches, but we were unable to access the DVD-ROM materials with our Macintosh G3. The disc promised much, much more which we didn't have the inclination to search for, but this DVD set should bring a sparkle to the eye of even the most jaded Harry Potter fan.





# D V D S



*Snoop Dogg as the eponymous avenging demon of BONES.*

## BONES

2001, New Line Entertainment, DD-5.1 & DD-2.0/DTS-6.1/MA/16:9/LB/ST/CC/+, \$24.98, 96m 48s, DVD-1

*"This is the story of Jimmy Bones/Black as night and hard as stone/Gold-plated deuce like the king of Siam/Got a switchblade loose and a diamond on his hand..."*

Scoring a sweet deal on a dilapidated brownstone in the slum fled by his family twenty years earlier, Buppie entrepreneur Patrick Peet (Khalil Kain), rapper brother Bill (Merwin Mondesir), DJ pal Maurice (Sean

Amsing) and kid sister Tia (**GINGER SNAPS'** Katharine Isabelle) transform the ruin into a dance club to help breathe life back into the 'hood. Learning that the building was owned last by gangsta Jimmy Bones (recording star Snoop Dogg), the kids recall an old rhyme about the local hero's disappearance in 1979, before crack destroyed the community. After a storefront psychic (Pam Grier) warns the youths that their fixer-upper is "a bad place and a door to worse," Jimmy's skeleton is discovered moldering in the cellar, a knife stuck in its ribs. The foolhardy Maurice, after stealing the dead

man's celebrated diamond ring, is torn apart by a mysterious black dog, his flesh and blood consumed to reanimate Jimmy Bones' vengeful soul. Back out on the street, Mista Bones gets busy tracking down his murderers—whose number includes Patrick's now-affluent father.

The debut of Ernest Dickerson's **BONES** on DVD merits a look back at themes of horror and fear in art created (wholly or in part) by artists of color. Dickerson has acknowledged the origins of the Jimmy Bones rap in the postbellum murder ballad "Stagger Lee," reinterpreted by the diverse likes of Lloyd Price,



Mississippi John Hurt, Bob Dylan, The Grateful Dead and Nick Cave. In most versions, Stagger Lee is a grudge killer laid low by the widow of a man he gunned down for winning his prized Stetson hat in a crap game; in rarer versions, the character causes the Great San Francisco Earthquake and, after fighting the Devil in Hell, returns to Earth triumphant! Spooks ran wild in the swing era as ectoplastic extensions of a racial pessimism rooted in the African slave trade. In 1939, Cab Calloway resurrected Minnie the Moocher's dead paramour in "The Ghost of Smokey Joe" while Fats Waller shouted testimony that "Abercrombie Had a Zombie." One recurring *haunt* was the subject of both the 1935 Louis Armstrong romp "Ole Man Mose Is Dead" and Nat King Cole's 1939 answer song "Ole Man Mose Ain't Dead." The Walter Doyle composition "Mysterious Mose" was used for (and its title appropriated by) a 1930 Paramount short in which Betty Boop is bedeviled by a shape beneath her sheets who turns out to be her pet dog (a bit echoed in **BONES**, in a suspense setpiece originally involving a horny hellhound until New Line bitched about the suggestion of bestiality and ordered cuts). Mose was reincarnated for the 1940 MGM cartoon "Swing Social" and Peggy Lee sang the story with the Charlie Barnett Orchestra in the 1946 Puppetoon "Jasper in a Jam," in which George Pal's popeyed pickaninny spends a nervous night locked inside a pawn shop.

Revenge is the soul of the plot of many horror films involving African-American characters. **BLACULA** (1972), **SUGAR HILL** (1974), **CANDYMAN** (1992) and **TALES FROM THE HOOD** (1995) all worked issues of color and class into narratives about the

supernatural recourse of the wronged. Equally obsessed with vengeance but focused on betrayal rather than bigotry, **BONES** vilifies blacks who bought their way up from poverty by spilling the blood of their own. Jimmy Bones' murder at the hands of the upwardly mobile Jeremiah Peet (Clifton Powell) and the ambitious Eddie Mack (a powerhouse performance by Ricky Walker)—an act committed with the collusion of corrupt white cop Lupovich (Michael T. Weiss)—is sufficiently catastrophic to turn the crime scene into a sucking Hellmouth whose walls are papered with the scorched hides of the damned. Twenty years on, Jeremiah has remade himself as a Cosby-sweatered pillar of his gated community, while Eddie Mack and Lupovich have grown phat (or, in the latter's case, just fat) exploiting their turf. Dickerson and his scenarists set the stage for **BONES** to be a bracing counter-myth, marrying superstition to its societal second-cousin, racial prejudice (not for nothing does the squirming Underworld resemble the teeming hold of a slave ship)—but the filmmakers no sooner set the stage than drop curtain on the script's

most intriguing act. Even as a simple spookshow, **BONES** fails to deliver the goods.

The notion of a Negro hell-raiser back from the grave to pony up with those who profited from his passing was better realized in Arthur Marks' **J.D.'S REVENGE** (1976), which issued a challenge to the errant machismo of Blaxploitation by arguing that undying hatred can do the living no earthly good. Less transgressive, **BONES** contents itself with lifting fashion tips from the principal players of Blaxploitation, minus the harsh subtext that made those characters compelling. In flashbacks, the filmmakers portray Jimmy Bones as mellow and civic-minded (no wonder the bookie is so popular with his constituency—all we see him do is pay off), allowing their hero control over the community in denial of the likelihood that his juice was squeezed from the very acts of cruelty and betrayal he opposes. Meanwhile, Jimmy's Judases are etched as all-too-human: to find their place in the sun, Jeremiah and Eddie commit sins that are, however repugnant, at least understandable. The film's biggest misstep is its "nigligence" of Black America's pragmatic high

*Pam Grier feels a violent past reaching out to her in this Mario Bava-inspired moment from **BONES**.*





tolerance for the end justifying the means, so long as a brother gets away with it (think O.J. Simpson). While Jeremiah and Eddie personify the warts-and-all struggle for survival, Snoop Dogg's martyred Jimmy Bones hangs in the amber of '70s nostalgia (kept company by the iconic Pam Grier, who evinces much soul but always seems less than lifelike). Pitched as **HIGH PLAINS DRIFTER** meets **A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET**, it's no surprise that **BONES** feels bipolar. The filmmakers never seem to know whether they want Jimmy Bones to be avenging angel or hateful hellspawn and entangle their film in a post-modern briarpatch of references, both visual (**NOSFERATU**, **BLACK SUNDAY**, **THE WHIP AND THE BODY**) and verbal ("Be afraid, be very afraid"), to films made earlier—and better.

Opening around Halloween of 2001, **BONES** made back only half of its \$14 million budget, and did a third of the business of **VALENTINE** and less than a quarter of the take for **JEEPERS CREEPERS** and the remake of **THIR13EN GHOSTS**. (Dickerson's baby did, however, step all over **POOTIE TANG**.) **BONES** is currently a popular rental at many video stores and will most likely recoup its investment on the small screen—and the film does look exceedingly fine on this deluxe Region 1 DVD from New Line Entertainment. The anamorphic letterboxed (at 2.32:1) transfer is razor sharp. Dickerson and cinematographer Flavio Labiano (**DANCE WITH THE DEVIL**) employed a bleach bypass process to desaturate the more primary hues (the blood looks Peckinpah orange-red), resulting in a color palette dominated by grays and gunmetals

that are punctuated intermittently by smudgy process work evoking the veil separating the living from the dead. Surround sound options range from Dolby 5.1 and 2.0 mixes to a DTS 6.1 option for those with the required decoder. There are 19 chapter stops.

Ernest Dickerson is joined by Snoop Dogg and co-scenarist Adam Simon (writer-director of **BRAINDEAD** and the documentary **THE AMERICAN NIGHTMARE**) for a feature-length audio commentary. The track gets off to a rocky start with the participants mush-mouthing their remarks but there are some good stories about shooting in Vancouver (doubling for Chicago's south side), studio intervention, and the rationale for using grubworms instead of maggots ("Maggots bite"). The commentary is genial (hold your sides while Snoop describes Shakespeare's **JULIUS CAESAR** as "one of them great stories from the 1800s"), but it's distressing that Simon believes the horror genre requires a scientifically determined number of false scares, and that Dickerson considers horror films that are devoid of comic relief to be "one-note."

Dickerson also provides (optional) commentary for a selection of 14 deleted scenes (amounting to about 20m), most notably a bathtub fright scene involving Katharine Isabelle (given very little to do otherwise), a confrontation between Pam Grier and on-screen daughter Bianca Lawson (real life offspring of Richard Lawson, of **SCREAM**, **BLACULA**, **SCREAM**, and **POLTERGEIST**) and Blair Witch-style video interviews conducted by the film's hip-hop heroes. A letterboxed theatrical trailer (2m 5s) is included, and the "Theatrical Press Kit" features uncommonly comprehensive biographies of cast

and crew. Snoop Dogg is featured in two music videos of **BONES'** closing theme "Dogg Named Snoop," offered in both studio (3m 25s) and "live" (3m 50s) versions that employ imagery from the film.

In addition to a CD-ROM feature that allows the viewer to float between the shooting script and its celluloid realization, the disc presents two making-of documentaries (produced and directed by Michelle Palmierro). "Digging Up Bones" (23m 46s) deep-thinks movie horror, with to-camera testimonials from Dickerson, Snoop Dogg, Pam Grier, Clifton Powell, Michael T. Weiss, Ricky Harris, Adam Simon, producer Peter Heller, visual effects supervisor Ariel Shaw (**THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS**), prosthetic makeup designer Tony Gardner (**STIR OF ECHOES**) and production manager Douglas Higgins (who graduated from the role of Assistant Art Director on **THE EXORCIST** to Production Designer on **CRYING FREEMAN** and **STIGMATA**), accompanied by behind-the-scenes footage of filming, makeup and set construction (particularly, the wall of wailing souls), production sketches, storyboards and a peek at the Mack 10 video "Only in California" that prefigured much of the imagery in **BONES**. "Urban Gothic: **BONES** and Its Influences" (18m 56s) offers props to Mario Bava and the Italian school of erotic horror, with additional sound bytes from DP Flavio Labiano, Bava associate Alfredo Leone, and film historian David Del Valle. The short is illustrated with clips from Murnau's **NOSFERATU**, as well as from Bava's **BARON BLOOD**, **THE WHIP AND THE BODY** and **BLOOD AND BLACK LACE** (and





Graham Crowden (center) as the mad Dr. Millar, bent on creating the Perfect Man in Lindsay Anderson's scathing satire, *BRITANNIA HOSPITAL*.

their trailers). "It's cool to acknowledge your influences," Dickerson confesses—and while the respect paid Bava is encouraging, it only accentuates the differences between these two cinematographers-turned-filmmakers: the best that Dickerson can do in his adoration is mimic Bava, but he seems unable or unwilling to better the instruction. —Richard Harland Smith

### BRITANNIA HOSPITAL

1982, Anchor Bay Entertainment, DD-2.0/16:9/LB/+, \$19.98, 115m 53s, DVD-1

In the opening sequence of **BRITANNIA HOSPITAL**, an elderly patient is rushed to hospital in an ambulance whose way is blocked by striking workers (including a very young Robbie Coltrane). Once the elderly arrival is passed through, the staff decline to attend to him since their shift is over. Alone in an empty ward, the old man expires. So goes Lindsay Anderson's most jaundiced film, where the

humor ranges from mordant satire to the low comedy of Britcoms like *ARE YOU BEING SERVED?* (The presence in the cast of British TV performers Leonard Rossiter, Robin Askwith and Peter Jeffrey cannot be accidental.) Payoffs to jokes are grotesque—and so lacking in subtlety that one suspects Anderson of taking his punchlines rather too literally—yet the film somehow manages an agreeable loopiness.

The satire of this 1982 film is downright prescient. The opening is an absurdist inversion of *E.R.*, a show that wouldn't come along for another decade. Similarly, another scene which is clearly a riff on Hammer's Frankenstein films—Alan Price's score even breaks into a James Bernard pastiche—looks more like an anticipation of 1985's **RE-ANIMATOR**. And there are predictions in the climactic monologue that are dead on—among them that, someday, entertainers will make enough in a month to feed a Third World village for a century.

**BRITANNIA HOSPITAL** is Anderson's third entry—following **IF...** (1969, which he inherited from Seth Holt) and **O LUCKY MAN!** (1973)—in what has been termed the "Mick Travis Trilogy" because of the presence of that character, or more precisely, a character of that name played by Malcolm McDowell, since Travis shows little consistency from film to film. The real continuity is that all three films are "deeply anarchistic," as the director described **IF...**, defining anarchy as "a social and political philosophy which puts the highest possible value on responsibility." Here he presents a society incapable of accepting any responsibility or communicating in anything other than demands or clichéd rhetoric (significantly, telephones and radios constantly malfunction).

"Anarchistic" is also a fair description of Anderson's approach to this half-day in the life of a British hospital, which is simultaneously expecting a royal visit to commemorate the opening of an experimental surgical



wing, beleaguered by a workforce either striking or threatening it, picketed by demonstrators and investigated by one reporter (McDowell) equipped with high-tech gadgets, while a BBC crew fastidiously prepares a more flattering documentary.

There are no heroes within these intersecting situations. The characters are self-serving and venal—even homicide is not beyond them, if it furthers their ends—and the apparent class warfare is more an excuse than the reason for their behavior. Graham Crowden as Millar, the same character he played in **O LUCKY MAN!** and the *sine qua non* of mad doctors, commits two murders to obtain parts for his transplant experiments, Rossiter as the hospital administrator fells a striking worker with a shovel and the protestors account for another three deaths. Other characters may be less bloodthirsty, but no more admirable. Indolent staff complain nonstop about their workload, but are insulted if any of it is subcontracted; the visiting royals view any lower class as subhuman. Travis, who was the focal point of the prior entries, is little more than a featured player here and cynically views reporting as just another sales job.

The film seems haphazard—as though the makers of **AIRPLANE** attempted an adaptation of *CANDIDE* in the style of **CASINO ROYALE**—but repeated viewing reveals a masterfully flowing, if unconventional, construction. The far more stylistically chaotic **O LUCKY MAN!** had amiably amoral Travis as its glue; **BRITANNIA HOSPITAL** has Crowden—in a brilliantly sly, exuberant performance—positioned at its center. He is the only authority figure who inspires

loyalty from his staff and returns it, the only one to have a clue (however warped) about the nature of the world around him (or aware it exists for that matter) and the only one to have a vision of the future that extends beyond muddling through the current day with a minimum of disaster and a maximum of smugness. Anderson gives him the film's final word, too, but for all his resemblance to a Chuck Jones creation, he's as cuddly as a cobra.

Anderson characteristically scorns any distinction between reality and fantasy, but, in the first two films, the latter sprang from the former even if the line of demarcation was not always discernible. **BRITANNIA HOSPITAL** exists wholly in a political cartoon of England, so its excoriation (satire is too mild a word) feels like an extended episode of an extremely nihilistic sitcom, never quite attaining the epic lunacy it should and only rarely achieving the director's stated goal of poetry (as in a riot scored with "God Save the Queen," a brilliant sequence which begins with a particularly chilling "gag").

Perhaps the world he saw aborning was more than Anderson himself could bear, and so he couched the entire film as a farcical fantasy. Yet the humor strikes so close to the bone that even the funniest moments practically proscribe laughter. The comedy is more often due to the performers than the material and, if nothing else can be said of Anderson, he coaxes brilliant work from his actors. In addition to those already noted, Jill Bennett, Joan Plowright, Mark Hamill and Vivian Pickles contribute excellent portraits, even if ultimately the picture is stolen from all of them by Crowden.

This Anchor Bay release has only a modicum of extras; there are two trailers (2m 53s, 1m 39s) and talent bios (limited to Anderson and McDowell); an informative, albeit brief interview with McDowell (12m) and 29 chapter marks. But **BRITANNIA HOSPITAL** hasn't been easy to see; it was released in Britain during the Falklands *contretemps* to general indifference and was barely screened in the US, before it emerged on Thorn-EMI Video in a dark and murky transfer par for that company's course. With this history in mind, the film's arrival on DVD is all the more welcome—and with a gorgeous widescreen (1.85) presentation and crisp sound, who needs a slew of extras? Its gleefully vitriolic tone seems unlikely to appeal widely to a post-9/11 buying public (more bad timing?), but anyone whose taste runs to **THE RULING CLASS** or **MONTY PYTHON'S THE MEANING OF LIFE** should find this of interest. —Harry Long

## THE CHANGELING

1980, HBO Home Video, DD-2.0/16:9/LB/CC/+, \$14.98, 106m 32s, DVD-1

## THE WOMAN IN BLACK

1989, BFS Entertainment, DD-2.0, \$29.90, 101m 22s, DVD-1

Serious ghost stories, currently on a roll thanks to the high-profile successes of **THE SIXTH SENSE** and **THE OTHERS**, have never boomed as a horror subgenre, perhaps because the M.R. James/Algernon Blackwood style works best in short story form. Many novel-length or feature-length ghost stories have essentially the same plot, as is demonstrated by this pair of valuable releases: a protagonist,





*George C. Scott traces the unrest of his haunted house to things in the attic, in **THE CHANGELING**.*

perhaps himself psychologically haunted, spends time in an isolated old house which has a bad reputation with the locals thanks to a history of tragedies. While being pestered by strange nocturnal noises, apparitions and animated objects, the hero delves into the origins of the haunting and discovers the root cause in an appalling crime, while coming increasingly under attack from the beyond. Often, the climax comes with the burning of the house, which sets the ghost free. **THE CHANGELING** and **THE WOMAN IN BLACK**, from different countries and media, even share a central locus for the haunting, as a child's bouncing ball leads respective heroes to find a bricked-up playroom full of outmoded toys, memorial to a murdered child whose unquiet spirit needs to communicate with them. Both take heed of Henry James's "extra turn of the screw" and make the deaths of children their ultimate horror.

Made (mostly in Canada) in 1980 by British-resident Hungarian Peter Medak, who apparently stepped in late in pre-production after the departure of originally-slated director Donald Cammell, **THE CHANGELING** has echoes of **DON'T LOOK NOW**, directed by Cammell's **PERFORMANCE** partner Nicolas Roeg, in that it opens with an accidental death in the family, traumatizing the surviving father who is thus left vulnerable to a later, unconnected haunting. Composer John Russell (George C. Scott) is trapped in a phone booth (and a striking freeze-frame under the credits) as a snowbound accident takes the lives of his wife (Jean Marsh) and young daughter. He tries to start anew by accepting a teaching post in Seattle and leases "the Chessman house," an isolated mansion maintained by an Historical Society whose representative is Claire Norman (Trish Van Devere). It becomes apparent

that the various phenomena to which Russell is sensitive—ranging from the expected noises and visions to the eerie coincidence of him composing a piece based on a tune he later discovers on a music box in that sealed-up playroom—that the house is haunted by a sickly child drowned in 1906. Three quarters of a century later, the distinguished Senator Carmichael (Melvyn Douglas, in one of his last roles) wants the truth to remain buried.

**THE CHANGELING** isn't free of narrative problems. By allowing manifestations outside the central house, it diffuses the power of its haunting as bones are discovered, **RING**-like, in a covered well at *another* haunted location. Though the hero is never endangered by the ghost, on whose interests he is acting, the spook can reach out and cause a fatal accident or two, begging the question of why it needs Russell to effect its retribution and has waited so long



(indeed, until after the death of the primary villain). However, it is still superior melodrama: impressive art direction from Trevor Williams (a frequent Dan Curtis collaborator) and cinematography by John Coquillion (**WITCH-FINDER GENERAL**, **STRAW DOGS**) make the Chessman House suitably cavernous and ominous, even as it must also be charming and seductive to keep Russell on the case. Scott, in a rare, understated, "regular fellow" performance, is an effectively curious hero, his own neuroses making him especially vulnerable to the appeal of a dead child. Medak probably hadn't seen **THE SHINING**, released slightly earlier that year, but some sequences parallel Kubrick's King picture—that bouncing ball is in **THE SHINING** too, and a POV shot of a child's animated wheelchair chasing Van Devere echoes Danny's tricycling along the corridors of the Overlook Hotel. Because the ghost only poses a threat to the film's villains (Douglas gives a sympathetic reading of the role of a man asked to pay for a crime he has benefitted from, but can't be held responsible for), **THE CHANGELING** is rarely terrifying in the way **THE RING** or **THE WOMAN IN BLACK** are. Nevertheless, there is an unconventional, disturbing séance scene, as a medium scribbles answers in a rising frenzy of automatic writing, and one or two of the wheelchair's sudden lurches are well-staged shocks.

Based on the highly-regarded 1983 novel by Susan Hill (an M.R. James pastiche also adapted as a long-running stage play), **THE WOMAN IN BLACK** was scripted by Nigel Kneale (of **QUATERMASS** fame) as Central Television's 1989 attempt to revive the 1970s

BBC tradition of broadcasting a ghost story (like Kneale's **THE STONE TAPE**) over the Christmas holiday. In his script, Kneale made a few major changes: famously protective of his own character names, he disapproved of Hill's appropriation of her hero from H.G. Wells and turned her Arthur Kipps into Arthur Kidd (Adrian Rawlings). He also came up with a more abrupt, ruthless ending that carries through Hill's situation in a logical manner that proved upsetting to some Christmas viewers.

In the 1920s, with **THE GOLD RUSH** at the cinema, solicitor Kidd is despatched to the coastal village of Crythin Gifford to sort out the estate

of the recently-deceased Alice Drablow. Her house, reachable only at low tide by a causeway across misty marshlands, is shunned by the locals, and Kidd finds himself regularly listening to a replay of a tragic carriage accident (as in **THE STONE TAPE**, the haunting is also a recording, emphasized by the presence of a Stoker-like wax cylinder dictaphone). At Alice's funeral, Kidd notes a mourner (Pauline Moran) ignored by everyone else; shortly after, he intervenes to save a gypsy child from a street accident the villagers resignedly stand by and watch. Kidd comes to realize that the woman in black is a ghost and digs into her nasty story, which leads him to learn

*Pauline Moran will make your hair stand on end in THE WOMAN IN BLACK.*





why there are so many child's gravestones in the churchyard and wonder whether or not his superior in London understands the real dangers he is exposed to at Eel Marsh House.

Directed by UK TV veteran Herbert Wise (a mainstay of ROALD DAHL'S TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED), who should not be confused with the English pseudonym of Luciano Ricci (**CASTLE OF THE LIVING DEAD**), **THE WOMAN IN BLACK** is rougher-looking than **THE CHANGELING** but more cunning in its scare strategies. John Russell can help the murdered boy from 1906, but Arthur Kidd is a helpless aural witness to the repeated sounds of the fatal accident, which makes him jump whenever he hears the (for the period) entirely everyday sound of a horse-drawn carriage passing by a window. At the heart of Hill and Kneale's approach, in which a gritty nugget of human madness or evil is coated with layers of the supernatural to become a pearl of horror, is Kidd's never-answered question as to whom the ghost boy is calling when he cries "Mummy" in the endlessly-replayed last moments of his life. As in the stage version, the few appearances of the titular specter are powerful *coups de théâtre*: she is unnerving in daylight, as Kidd stands aside and we see her starkly posed in the landscape like another gravestone or remnant of a ruin, and absolutely terrifying in a set-piece that has Kidd wake up expecting the benevolent ghost of the child who has been trying to communicate, only to find the woman (with a Bava-look grimace) looming over him. In both films, happy families are doomed to be smitten by **OMEN**-like freak accidents: but in **THE CHANGELING**, things are eventually resolved and Russell can get on



*At a funeral, Adrian Rawlings observes the presence of a mourner that no one else sees.*

with his life unburdened by ghosts, but **THE WOMAN IN BLACK** depicts an evil no deaths or burned mansions will ever dispel.

HBO Home Video's no-frills **CHANGELING** DVD offers 16 chapter stops and a 16:9 presentation, with only notes on key cast and crew and optional English, Spanish or French subtitles as extras. The print quality is good for a twenty-year-old picture no special measures have been taken with, representing Coquillion's fondness for a certain amount of grain combined with smooth camera moves, though the fine Dolby Surround soundtrack doesn't quite match the layered creepiness I remember from the theatrical release, where the ghost's whispers seemed to fill the auditorium with a suggestive susurrus.

BFS Entertainment's **WOMAN IN BLACK** DVD is even shorter on extras, limited to a menu screen and a trailer for the **SHARPE** series (for which Kneale also wrote) that plays automatically as a prelim. Those unused to British TV movies might find

the look of the fullscreen transfer a little on the battered side, with occasional mistiming (grainy blue creeping into what ought to be solid black shadow on one side of the screen) or scratch. Comparison with the average **INSPECTOR MORSE** shows this was UK TV standard in the late 1980s and the shot-on-film PAL look adds to the film's sense of the ambiguous, especially in atmospheric exterior sequences and the ghostly moments.

In double billing, bear in mind that, if you want to go to sleep untroubled, you should program the cozier **THE CHANGELING** after the crueller **THE WOMAN IN BLACK**. —Kim Newman

## THE CITY OF THE DEAD

1960, VCI Entertainment, DD-1.0/MA/16:9/LB/+, \$24.99, 77m 53s, DVD-0

We last looked at this British perennial in 1995 [VW 27:60], when Tim Lucas reviewed Elite's laserdisc of the luridly-titled but slightly abbreviated American version, **HORROR HOTEL**. Since



then, there have been DVD releases from Elite, Diamond and the Roan Group under the same title, all clocking in at the Elite length of 75m 58s. The longer British cut, entitled **THE CITY OF THE DEAD**, adds about two more minutes to the opening 1692 "burn, witch, burn" sequence; there is added ranting at the stake from accused witch Elizabeth Selwyn (Patricia Jessell) and more angry cries from the Puritan mob. VCI's new DVD release is a significant advance not only in added footage but in superior print quality and framing, and a surprising wealth of extras. It will probably stand as the definitive version of this minor but undoubtedly pleasing exercise in the occasional "witches' curse" sub-genre (cf: **WITCHCRAFT, THE HAUNTED PALACE**).

Though remembered as an early credit for producer Max J. Rosenberg and writer Milton Subotsky, later the heads of

Amicus, it is notable that none of the principals interviewed mention their names, all listing producer Donald Taylor as the prime mover of the project. Tim Lucas assumed that the storyline's similarities to **PSYCHO** were down to quick-off-the-mark imitation; here, director John Moxey and star Venetia Stevenson (who knew Hitchcock and had appeared on his TV show) both claim to have worked on **THE CITY OF THE DEAD** before they were aware of **PSYCHO**, which is not to say that Subotsky, who wrote the story George Baxt turned into a script, didn't catch **PSYCHO** earlier. He was certainly not above lifting others' plotlines whole; the "Voodoo" episode of **DR. TERROR'S HOUSE OF HORRORS** (1965) is a steal from Cornell Woolrich's "Papa Benjamin."

The film comes from a point in the history of British horror when Hammer Films

had established themselves as market leaders but competitors were cropping up, often using genre stars made (Christopher Lee) or developed (Valentine Dyall) by Hammer in films that otherwise hark back to earlier styles. **THE CITY OF THE DEAD** is a foggy B&W exercise with a contemporary setting overshadowed by the weight of history. Quite different in tone from Hammer's highly-colored period pieces, the film draws from both the classic Universal and 1940s Val Lewton style for plot devices and stagebound visual licks. It is also among the last of the many British features (cf: **FIEND WITHOUT A FACE, THE FIRST MAN INTO SPACE**) to adopt mock-American settings, though here this is not so much to accommodate a marquee value star as to tie in with the specifics of New England history, and perhaps the literary legacy of H.P. Lovecraft.

*In THE CITY OF THE DEAD, the good people of Whitewood don dark cloaks by night to conduct virgin sacrifices...*







... under the Satanic swagger of Patricia Jessell and Christopher Lee.

Retelling the old, old story of the malicious woman burned as a witch who curses her persecutors and survives immolation (apparently through a form of sacrificial vampirism) to keep her coven going, the film is an enjoyable hokum melodrama. However, it does follow entirely too many fantasy films (an honorable exception is **LOVE AT STAKE**) in perpetuating an historical injustice by alleging that the condemned women and men of Salem were guilty as charged and deserved to be executed. To stretch a point, this is like making a series of horror films in which the Jewish victims of pogrom and holocaust are represented as the baby-sacrificing conspirators of the blood libel. Less serious is the equally common perpetuation of a common fallacy: as in England, the punishment for witchcraft in the colonies in 1692 was hanging, not the burning at the stake seen in so many movies. The film works best as a sustained exercise in and visual (and aural) invention: the

fogbound streets of Whitewood with the villagers posed like scarecrows, anonymous witches dancing in darkness to somehow-sinister jazz in the lobby of the Raven's Inn, Lee's voyeuristic twitch of pleasure as the sacrificial knife comes down, the shadow-etched faces and radio-trained voices of character stars Dyall (as an evil hypocrite) and Norman Macgowan (as a blind priest), Stevenson's elaborately unlikely foundation garments, the bells striking the hour of 13 to add suspense to the initial sacrifice and give the heroes time to save the day at the end. On the down side are stiff, unlikeable performances from crooner Dennis Lotis as the science professor hero (whose scorn of his sister's historical interests seems downright rude) and Tom Naylor as the sister's jock boyfriend, Bill Maitland (carelessly listed as Tom Maitland in the credits—the first instance of this recurring character surname in Subotsky's filmography).

VCI's print is approximately 1.66:1 in enhanced widescreen, with a sliver less information at top and bottom and several slivers more at the sides than the Roan disc and 18 chapter-stops. The print is in much better condition, entirely free of image flaws, with rich blacks and greys that show off Desmond Dickinson's exemplary shadows-and-fog deep focus cinematography and Moxey's interesting placement of characters in the frame. Only a few tiny variations in volume give away some restoration work done on the mono sound elements: the occasional soundtrack crackle invariably turns out to be a subtle, intentional effect indicating one of the many fires that crop out throughout in reminder of the original pyre.

Extras include: a theatrical trailer, a recreation with video-burn titles and an MMI copyright; an imaginative menu with manipulated artwork of eyes, flames and gravestones; an animated



photo gallery; biographical notes for director and principle cast; two separate, wide-ranging commentary tracks (Lee, interviewed by Jason Slater, and Moxey, with unheard prompts); and substantial video interviews with Stevenson (whose post-acting career included production chores on **SOUTHERN COMFORT**), Moxey and Lee. The Roan release also had a (somewhat stiff) video chat with Lee, probing his limited memories of a film he can hardly have done more than a couple of days' work on forty years ago, but his commentary has a lot more meat (including a few pointed remarks about Moxey and Dickinson's tendency to keep some actors' faces in shadow or turned away from the camera) and a 45m video chat conducted by Brad Stevens is one of his best recent interviews, covering some expected familiar topics (the eternal gripe over the perception that he is typecast as Dracula) but also reaching for rarely-tapped memories of working with John Huston, Robert Siodmak, Nicholas Ray, Orson Welles and Edgar G. Ulmer. The keepcase sleeve is reversible, offering a choice of artwork. —Kim Newman

## THE FEMALE ANIMAL

### *La Mujer del Gato*

"The Catwoman"

1969, Retro-Seduction Cinema,  
DD-2.0/MA/LB/+, \$19.98,  
91m 42s, DVD-0

After seeing the trailer for **THE FEMALE ANIMAL** on another Retro-Seduction Cinema release, we couldn't wait to see it; it was completely unknown to us, the excerpts seemed to go out of their way to be outrageous (half-naked woman trying to French kiss her pet cat, etc.), and it

promised to be a Euro cult discovery in waiting. In a way, it is, but it's also a joke—and the joke is on us. This Spanish/Italian co-production, directed by Juan Carlo Grinella, is the story of Angelique (Arlene Tiger), a prostitute who boasts of having as many as 69 customers in a day, beginning with an afternoon assignation with a pock-marked priest and then, after a main titles sequence in Spanish, regresses in time to dramatize the circumstances of her tumble from innocence. Orphaned and raised to young adulthood in the home of her bitchy aunt and crippled uncle, Angelique's life changes one day when her bicycle is run off the road by the limousine of Count Medici, a millionaire who is in a hurry, but nevertheless awestruck by the sight of her ample cleavage ("She looks so young... so untouched"—a remark that seems humorous, because the film has given us no hint that the story has moved backwards in time), so much so that he offers her a job as his maid. There is one condition: she must have nothing to do with the Count's detested son, Alain, a worthless playboy. The night of her hiring, Angelique goes to a discotheque and, noticing Alain at a table with his rich girlfriend Carla (the subject of a memorable underwater sex scene), pulls the stripper offstage and takes her place, captivating his attention. The situation at the mansion is odd, and it only becomes odder with the Count's failure to even attempt to seduce his new maid, and the arrival of Francesca (the ex-lover of the Count's late wife), who suspects otherwise ("She's never emptied a slop bucket in her life!") and soon puts the make on the girl herself. As the story continues its

peculiar arc, the Count bets Angelique to his son by seating her on a casino gaming table. Alain wins her and introduces her to marijuana and LSD (leading into a nice tripping sequence, scored with hot Michael Karoli-like lead guitar, credited to Clay Pitts), and an amusing, unexpected finale that offers a rather cosmically wise observation of our heroine ("She wasn't much fun anyway"), before she leaves the mansion to embark on her fate.

**THE FEMALE ANIMAL** carries the Independent-International logo, and now that the movie's over, the real fun begins with an audio commentary provided by Il president Samuel M. Sherman. He allows that he had nothing whatsoever to do with the production of this film, but he promises a fascinating background story and proceeds to deliver one—in spades. To begin with, the film's Spanish/Italian patrimony is "sheer exploitation, sheer nonsense," in Sherman's words. Director "Juan Carlo Grinilla" was none other than Cinemation Industries magnate Jerry Gross, who shot this film in Puerto Rico, later adding the pre-credits sequence, which he shot in New York City; furthermore, Euro spitfire starlet "Arlene Tiger" was in fact Arlene Sue Farber, a Gross discovery who previously starred under her own name in his first two directorial efforts, **GIRL ON A CHAIN GANG** and **TEENAGE MOTHER!** Though the commentary track runs only 32m 42s, Sherman unearths more information about Jerry Gross than we've ever read or heard before, reminiscing about his own friendship with Gross, charting the history of his career, explaining the financial reasons for the downfall of Cinemation, how Independent-International





Arlene Tiger stars in Jerry Gross's faux Euro skinflick, *THE FEMALE ANIMAL*.

acquired certain titles from their orphaned catalogue, and even pointing out an unbilled cameo by Gross at the end of the picture (as the pimp who leads Angelique into prostitution, a role that Sherman, incredibly, misinterprets as the girl's gallant young savior!). Sherman may miss the boat as a story analyst, but as a chronicler of film business history, he has few peers. Whatever else it may be, **THE FEMALE ANIMAL** is a well-crafted ballyhoo bauble, a counterfeit Euro sex film that actually fooled us—although we were a bit curious about why Spanish credits were attached to an uncut film dating from the censorious Franco era! There are some minor faults in the recording of Sherman's talk (eg., intermittent dips in the volume), but we applaud it as a major contribution to the verbal history of exploitation cinema.

Shot in Panavision, **THE FEMALE ANIMAL** is presented in a non-anamorphic 2.35:1 ratio, which offers a cropped head or two which must be blamed on cinematographer George Zimmerman,

who otherwise does a good job of investing the film with ripe, fleshy, somberly colored images that reminded us now and again of **FUEGO**. The source element is better than adequate, but with gatefloat very apparent during the II logo and increased speckling and frame damage at reel changes. Digital video noise reduction renders certain images and areas of profuse detail (palm fronds in the wind, the gaming table, an electrical works) over sharp-looking and, well, noisy. The mono audio, with its feigned postsynch veneer, is very good.

The film's trailer is included (we recommend watching it first), and it is interesting to note that it carries an X rating (self-imposed, by the look of it), while the DVD keepcase carries a more official-looking R rating. Rather worn-looking trailers for Joe Sarno's **INGA** and **THE SEDUCTION OF INGA** can also be accessed on the not-easily-mastered menu. A bonus "featurette," **MASTER'S PLAY THING** (28m 46), a grainy shot-on-video bonus featuring

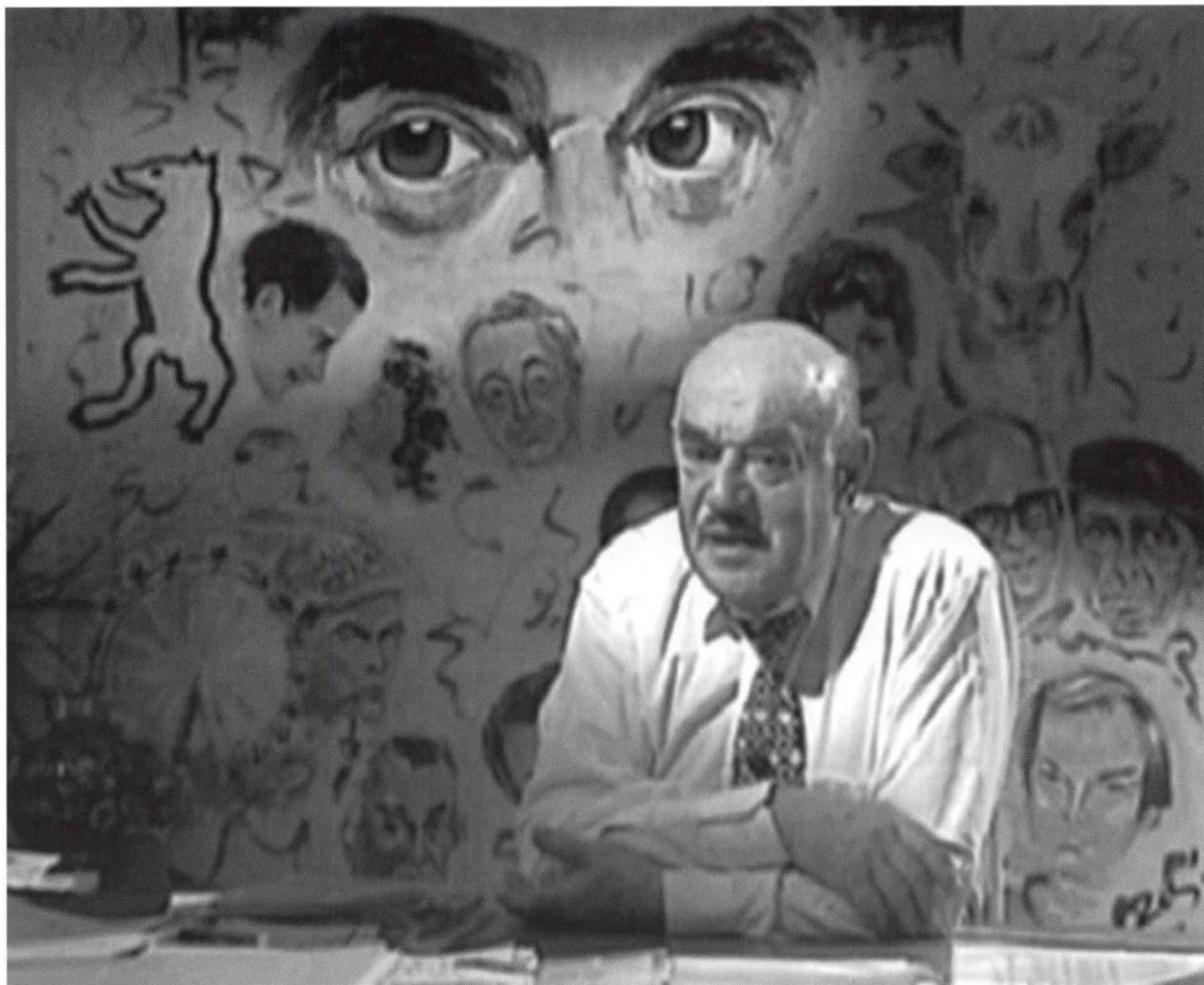
Seduction Cinema cover girl Misty Munda, is also included and seems largely irrelevant. —Tim Lucas

## FRITZ LANG: CIRCLE OF DESTINY

*Fritz Lang: Le Cercle du Destin*  
—*Les Films Allemands*  
1998, Image Entertainment,  
DD-2.0/S/16:9/LB, \$24.98,  
54m 20s, DVD-0

This French television documentary chronicles the two periods of Fritz Lang's involvement in the German cinema, incorporating on-camera interviews with Lang's friends and colleagues (Curt Siodmak, Claude Chabrol, Cornelius Schnauber), producers (Artur Brauner), critics (Alfred Eibel, Volker Schlöndorff), and biographer (Patrick McGilligan), film clips, production stills, and archival interview footage of Lang himself. While director Jorge Dana's film is well-meaning and fairly absorbing to anyone with a prior interest, it should not be mistaken for an introduction to the subject. Its allusions to the





German producer Artur Brauner is interviewed in a most Mabusian office setting in the documentary *FRITZ LANG: CIRCLE OF DESTINY*.

films in question—**DESTINY** [*Der Müde Tod*, 1921], **DR. MABUSE THE GAMBLER** [*Dr. Mabuse der Spieler*, 1922], **SIEGFRIED/KRIEMHILD'S REVENGE** [*Die Niebelungen*, 1923-24], **METROPOLIS** (1927), **SPIES** [*Spione*, 1928], **M** (1931), **THE INDIAN TOMB** and **THE TIGER OF ESCHNAPUR** [*Der Indische Grabmal* and *Die Tiger von Eschnapur*, 1959] and **THE 1000 EYES OF DR. MABUSE** [*Der Tausend Augen des Dr. Mabuse*, 1960]—are generally elliptic, while some titles like **THE SPIDERS** [*Die Spinnen*, 1920], **THE WOMAN IN THE MOON** [*Die Frau im Mond*, 1929], and Lang's final

Mabuse film are not excerpted at all.

The purpose of this documentary would seem to be to restate Lang's importance for a new generation ("90% of Hitchcock comes from **SPIES**," states Chabrol, who might have said the same of 100% of James Bond), while at the same time committing to film some of the important biographical uncoverings made by McGilligan in his superb 1997 work *NATURE OF THE BEAST*, including the matter of the alleged suicide of Lang's first wife, and the deflation of Lang's self-made legend about fleeing Germany after being offered the chancellorship of Nazi film by

Joseph Goebbels. In one of the film's most interesting passages, critics Eibel and Schlöndorff (who subsequently became the director of **YOUNG TÖRLESS**, **THE TIN DRUM** and many other films) look back on the vicious critical reception they accorded to Lang's 1959 cinematic homecoming with regret, explaining that the Indian films have aged remarkably well, with Schlöndorff (interviewed at the Studios Babelsberg, where **METROPOLIS** was filmed) adding that he was perhaps "too German" at the time to assess Lang's final works sympathetically.

Shot for HDTV, the program is letterboxed at approximately



1.78:1, with the clips from Lang's films windowboxed and two clips of Lang in Jean-Luc Godard's **CONTEMPT** [*Le Mepris*, 1963] shown in their full Franscope ratio. (With so much Bardot available now on VHS and DVD, why not *this*?) The stereo sound mix is very nice, and the music added to the silent clips (seemingly not truly affiliated with any print) is sometimes quite thrilling, particularly the accompaniment to the flood scene from **METROPO-LIS**. There are a dozen, not-particularly-necessary, chapter marks. —Tim Lucas

## GHOSTS OF MARS

2001, Columbia TriStar Home Video, DD-5.1/MA/16:9/LB/ST/+, \$19.95, 98m, DVD-1

A late addition to the short-lived Mars mania that recently possessed Hollywood, John Carpenter's **GHOSTS OF MARS** mixes the director's preferred genres—horror, science fiction and action—but more significantly brings him ever closer to producing a bonafide Western.

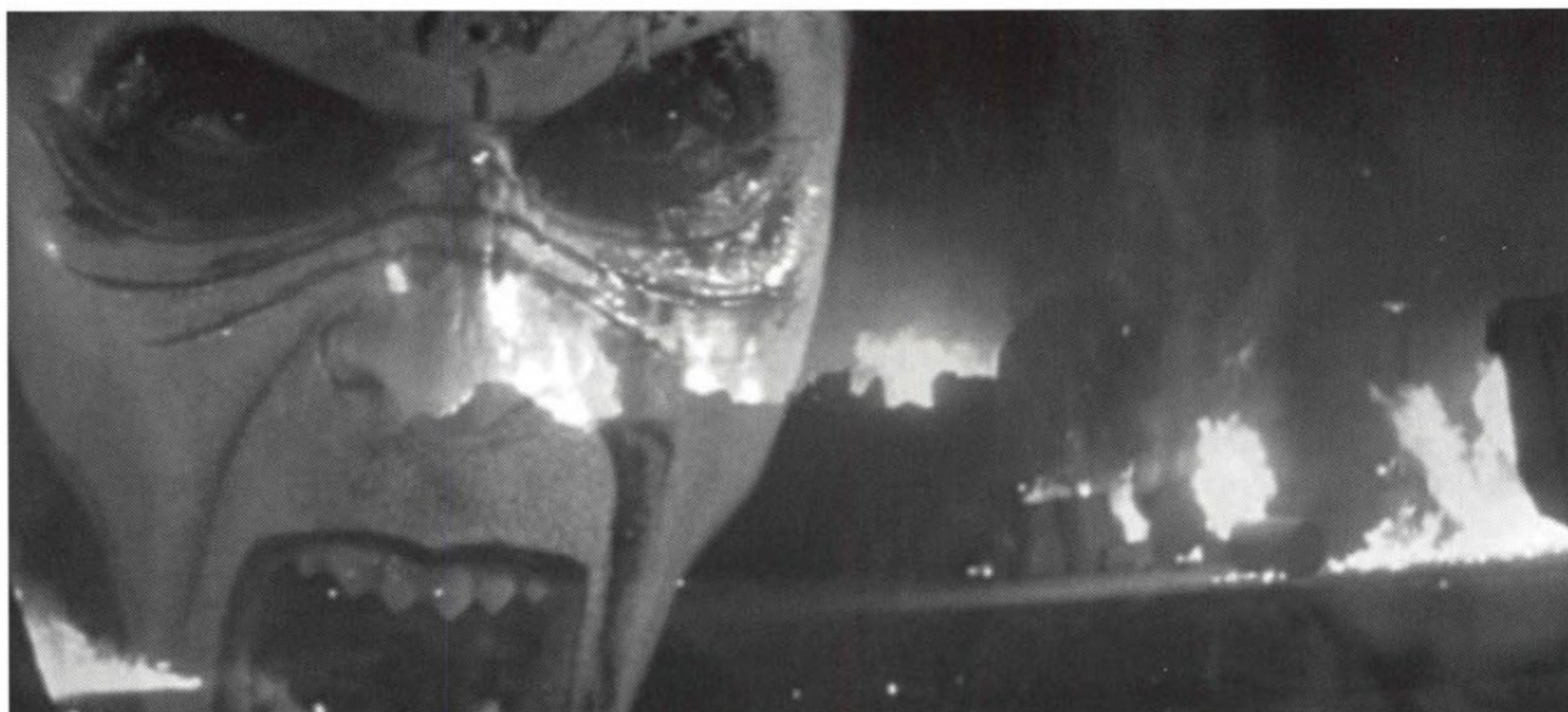
The year is 2176: Earth has sparsely populated Mars in a manner not unlike America's Wild West expansion of the 1800's. The film opens as a freight train pulls into Chryse Station, its only cargo a bruised and handcuffed Escort Police officer named Melanie Ballard (**SPECIES**' Natasha Henstridge). Failed in her mission to transfer a dangerous prisoner, Ballard faces a tribunal to explain what went wrong. At this point, the narrative falls in and out of flashbacks and we're introduced to Ballard and her team—bisexual Commanding Officer Braddock (Pam Grier), the horny-for-Ballard Sergeant Jericho (Jason Statham) and a couple of young

rookies (Clea DuVall, Liam Waite)—on a train to Shining Canyon Mine. Their mission: to pick up Desolation Williams (Ice Cube), a notorious and experienced outlaw charged with the murder and mutilation of several miners. Expecting a place crawling with the usual Friday night debauchers, the team is surprised to disembark in the middle of a ghost town. With the train away for four hours, the group scours the main buildings and uncovers a few unsettling items—hardware twisted into primitive art and a recreation center filled with headless corpses—yet down at the jailhouse, prime suspect Desolation is still locked up in solitary confinement. In addition, an assortment of oddball characters is found idling in a holding tank, but nobody—including Desolation—can offer an explanation for what's going on. Continuing the search, the cops finally spot some miners; and it's quite obvious from their self-mutilations and animal-like growls that they've gone totally insane. In a quarry, Jericho spies an assembled army of the possessed townspeople fashioning primitive weapons, practicing body piercing and executing anyone who doesn't belong to the pack. The outnumbered team plans its escape... but not before one of the survivors, guilt-ridden Dr. Whitlock (Joanna Cassidy), confesses that in excavating an ancient Martian tomb she unwittingly unleashed a spiritual force—the collective ghosts of a dead Martian race. Once these angry souls possess physical shells, they have only one goal: to rid their planet of any and all invaders. Ballard reluctantly concludes that, if they are going to escape with their lives, Desolation has to be freed... but can

she and her adversary learn to trust each other before the Martian horde attacks?

**GHOSTS OF MARS** shows a marked improvement over Carpenter's last attempt at a horror Western, the dismal **VAMPIRES**. It's an old-fashioned actioner that may not go down in history as his best work (**HALLOWEEN**, **THE THING**), but it may be his most quintessential. Carpenter's narrative combines the **RIO BRAVO**/**NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD**-inspired plot machinations of his seminal action outing, **ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13** (1976), with the Pandora's box of evil found in his later Lovecraft/Kneale-inspired works (**PRINCE OF DARKNESS**, **IN THE MOUTH OF MADNESS**). And he populates his desolate environment (a dusty desert to contrast with **THE THING**'s frozen landscape) with two of his most ubiquitous character archetypes: the Leone-inspired anti-hero (most popularly incarnated as Snake Plissken in **ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK**; like Snake, Desolation Williams wears camouflage pants, only on Mars the colors are red and black) pitted against the white-faced bogeyman that has been haunting the director's *oeuvre* for decades (the Shatner-masked Shape from **HALLOWEEN**, Alice Cooper's pasty-faced hobo zombie from **PRINCE OF DARKNESS**, the heavily made-up Lo Pan from **BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA** and the pale Valek from **VAMPIRES**). This time around, the bogeyman incarnation is the savage leader of the Martian warriors (dubbed "Big Daddy Mars" in the credits), whose filed-down teeth and fusion dress brings back memories of Frank Doubleday's cadaverous punk-savage creeps in Carpenter's **ASSAULT** and **ESCAPE**.





*In John Carpenter's latest, an Earth expedition finds itself susceptible to physical invasion by the GHOSTS OF MARS.*

To temper the familiarity of his tale (co-written with Larry Sulkis), Carpenter forsakes a simple linear approach for a more ambitious flashback technique (originally the script *was* laid out in chronological order). While it adds an element of mystery to the proceedings, the jumbled structure proves problematical. It spoils the outcome (we know Ballard will be the only survivor), and whenever there is a scene that does not involve Ballard, she has to rather awkwardly explain to the tribunal that what she's about to relate is a story that she was told by someone present within that story. Bouncing back and forth between points of view within a single character's flashback, Carpenter has to continually back up and repeat tail-ends of scenes, which threatens to dilute any build up of suspense; and whenever characters tell stories within Ballard's flashback, we have the odd phenomenon (certainly not unique in film history) of a flashback *within* a flashback. To Carpenter's credit, the structure gives the film an odd, dream-like rhythm and keeps what is

essentially a trite pulp action tale ripe with more interest than it may deserve.

Print graphics at the beginning establish that our future will be a matriarchal society, an interesting conceit that Carpenter further explores in situations and dialogue (when Desolation points out his inequality to Ballard, he mutters, "You've just got *the woman* behind your bullshit"). With women in charge, there are no longer societal anxieties over homosexuality and bisexuality, so the beautiful (and masculine) Ballard becomes an object of open desire for both women and men (her female C.O. makes a pass at her and, for a fleeting moment, it looks like the female Dr. Whitlock enjoys being roughed up by her). Jericho's aggressiveness would be intimidating in today's workforce, but Ballard is completely unphased by his overtures. We find out later that Jericho is actually certified to harass ("There's not many of us Breeders around," he says), and when Ballard finally decides to take him up on his offer, her passionless kiss is like a queen ant snaring a drone. Carpenter

also uses science fiction allegory to make a sly political statement about recreational drug use. Ballard is a casual user of a mild hallucinogen that is the future equivalent of marijuana. We and the film's characters perceive her habit as a character flaw until the drug ends up saving her life by driving an invading ghost out of her body.

If this is the most fun to be had in a John Carpenter film in many a moon, it's not for the tiring zombie clashes, but because the director's joy to be making an unabashed pseudo-Western shines through. When the heroes stand at the train station looking down the length of the town, all that's missing are the horses and tumbleweeds. Carpenter's directorial style—a fusion of Howard Hawks' "old school" conservatism with Hitchcock's roving subjective camera—has remained consistent through the years, but its origins become gloriously apparent here, among the dusty streets and squat stucco buildings (actually a redressed gypsum mine in New Mexico). We can feel the director's pleasure behind his camera as it



tracks alongside *macho* gun-toting heroes, and it's in these moments that the film becomes haunted not by Martians (surely a metaphor for the Apaches), but by the ghosts of John Wayne, Dean Martin and Ricky Nelson. With action and comedy revolving around a jail cell and a main character who is an addict, Hawks' **RIO BRAVO** is naturally referenced, but so is its near-remake **EL DORADO** (in the final shot of two heroes walking off together) and **THE BIG SKY** (a bit of comedy involving, of all things, a dismembered thumb). The director's enthusiasm and aplomb for old-fashioned action moviemaking makes up for the sketchiness of secondary characters and the weaknesses in his leads.

To say that box office reaction to **GHOSTS OF MARS** was lackluster would be the understatement of the year, so it comes as no surprise that Columbia TriStar announced their Special Edition DVD while the release prints were still warm from projection. The source material for this 16:9 enhanced transfer is pristine with a 2.35:1 framed image that is sharp and artifact free. The clarity helps one appreciate the colorful details in Gary Kibbe's cinematography. The thick red-gelled light that he throws onto rocks and sand creates a pulp-ideal Martian atmosphere; and his interior lighting of the rec center invokes the spirit of Mario Bava's thematically similar **PLANET OF THE VAMPIRES** with its stylishly illogical spots of purple, yellow and green. A fullscreen version is also included on the dual-layered disc, but the Panavision frame is badly compromised by the reformatting.

Of the supplements, it's the audio commentary that fans will be most interested in. Here, Carpenter comfortably shoots the bull with a pregnant Henstridge, essaying the role of interviewer for much of the time and ribbing her at every opportunity. Henstridge proves a good sport and returns the verbal abuse in one of the chattiest commentaries we've heard since **BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA** [reviewed VW 82:46]. One wishes that Carpenter would be more analytical of his story and themes (at one point he announces, "We should probably be talking more about the story, but I'd rather not"). And every time a miniature or animation effect pops up, he groans at their obviousness, which is strange because they are all very nicely done.

A "Video Diary" offers behind-the-scenes video of the location shooting in New Mexico with a heavy emphasis on physical effects and the extras being made up... "SFX Deconstructions" demonstrates before-and-after green screen shots combining actors, miniatures and CGI... and "Scoring **GHOSTS OF MARS**" shows the director-composer in the recording studio directing electric guitar riffs by Anthrax and Buckethead. The score is one of the more unusual among Carpenter's opera, favoring heavy metal band instruments over the usual electronics and communicating a jarring "Let's rock!" attitude. Opening text erroneously claims, "John Carpenter has composed the score for all of his 23 movies." Not only is the number wrong, but this is an insult to Ennio Morricone, Jack Nitzsche and Shirley Walker, who composed the scores for **THE THING**, **STAR MAN** and **MEMOIRS OF AN INVISIBLE MAN**, respectively. —Bill Cooke

## GOSFORD PARK

2001, Universal Home Video, DD-5.1/MA/16:9/LB/ST/+, \$26.98, 136m 49s, DVD-1

The central conceit of **GOSFORD PARK** is that it is an Agatha Christie-style country house weekend whodunit as directed by Robert Altman, with a large cast of upstairs/downstairs characters weaving in and out of each other's lives and stories as the plot winds on, almost unnoticed in the background. Authentic period detail, a rarely-noted Altman trait that once extended (in **VINCENT AND THEO**) to ensuring that paintings on view in an art dealer's gallery were exactly the ones there on the day the scene takes place, establishes the enormous amount of work necessary on the part of an army of servants to keep a party of the wealthy distracted in their idleness over a weekend in November 1932. This is perfectly matched with an intricate murder mystery that spins off from an absolutely thundering cliché that could be found in a movie of the period: bullying parvenu industrialist Sir William McCordle (Michael Gambon) has spent his life giving everyone in his orbit a motive to murder him, and is discovered at a surprisingly late point in the movie stabbed *and* poisoned by different hands. This then sidesteps in an unexpected manner, as the deferential police inspector on the case (Stephen Fry) gets nowhere because he is too class-conscious to properly interrogate the nobs or even consider that the servants might be involved ("I'm not interested in the servants, only people with a real connection to the dead man") and only the audience is given enough access to put together the full story behind the killing.



Different in tone from the UK TV series UPSTAIRS DOWNSTAIRS or Ang Lee's film **THE REMAINS OF THE DAY**, **GOSFORD PARK** works in a great deal of documentary detail (an American is surprised to learn that, though he is waited on hand and foot for most of the day, an Englishman is supposed to fetch his own breakfast from the buffet "cafeteria style") but as usual with Altman's panoramic films, it's the performances and the web of emerging relationships that fascinates. We stay with the servants throughout, learning about the masters through gossip and overheard snippets, and—perhaps in response to criticism that he's been weak on women recently (cf: **DR. T AND THE WOMEN**)—home in on strong female characters: housekeeper Mrs. Wilson (Helen Mirren) and cook Mrs. Croft (**THE DEVIL WITHIN HER**'s Eileen Atkins) who apparently hate each other but are ultimately shown to have a much more complicated relationship; head maid Elsie (Emily Watson) currently involved with Sir William and clearly destined to prosper once this social set-up has collapsed; and the insightful visiting maid Mary (Kelly MacDonald) of dotty, snobbish, nasty, entertaining aunt Constance, Countess of Trentham (Maggie Smith). The menfolk tend to be seen as flawed: upright butler Jennings (Alan Bates) is a drunk hiding a shameful past, valet Probert (Derek Jacobi) is almost the only person genuinely upset by the death, snarkily lecherous footman George (**WITNAIL AND I**'s Richard E. Grant) and apparent hardman visiting servant Parks (Clive Owen) who still has to be protected by women he doesn't quite notice.

Gambon is in splendidly rotten form, dashing a coffee cup out of Mirren's hand, threatening to cut off allowances or withdraw funding from his parasitical hangers-on. Most of the useless leisured classes are more shadowy characters: the host's ruthless wife Lady Sylvia (Kristin Scott-Thomas), society blackmailer Nesbitt (James Wilby) with sneered-at wife Mabel (Claudie Blakely), gloomy shaggy daughter Isobel (Camilla Rutherford), grouse-shooter deaf from sport and war Lord Stockbridge (Charles Dance) and desperate in-law who needs investment Commander Meredith (Tom Hollander). Into the mix are thrown silent film star Ivor Novello (**MIMIC**'s Jeremy Northam), who makes a living by "impersonating these people," and whose stardom impresses the servants but is calculatedly put down by titled folk who have no connection to popular culture (Constance cruelly needles him about the flop of the talkie version of **THE LODGER**), producer Morris Weissman (Bob Balaban) intent on researching **CHARLIE CHAN IN LONDON** (NB: the actual producer of that 1934 release was John Stone, though every other tiny dropped name checks out as factually accurate), and actor Henry Denton (Ryan Philippe) who pretends to be a servant to get into the role (there's a nice joke about his fake Scots accent and MacDonald's real one) and finds his lecherous advances more successful upstairs than downstairs, though when he reveals his imposture he finds petty revenges taken against him by the servants ("you can't be on both sides").

It's an interesting-looking picture that goes against the "heritage" expectations of the Merchant-Ivory school of days-gone-by

filmmaking with a lot of rain and gloom that suggests a well below-average weekend even before the murder. Altman's main attack, as always, is in catching acting moments, often on the fly and in the background: in an outstanding cast, there are great scenes for Watson (overcoming a lifetime of training to speak out against her employer's catty wife in a devastating act of self-destruction), Mirren and Atkins (an emotional clinch near the end that allows a lot of the backstory to come out) and a career highlight turn from Smith as the frightful, spiteful Countess (when Weissman refuses to give away the ending of his film because it would spoil the fun, Smith pricelessly delivers "oh, but none of us shall see it"). It has some outsider humor at the expense not only of the mostly-awful toffs, but also at the equally snobbish servants (belowstairs, everyone has the status of their employer and so a Countess's maid gets a prime spot at table over a commoner's maid), though the film producer is as gently sent up as the rest of them. The basic joke, which is older even than **Drole de Drame**, is that rigid British conventions of behavior and manners render a corpse irrelevant, but its real strength is in depth of feeling. Even among the upstairs types, Altman finds admirable people: the put-upon Mabel (sneered at for bringing only one dress to wear for the weekend), who brings her horrible husband to heel, and the "fucking desperate" Meredith, who realises that he may be in a financial tailspin but has the only happy marriage in the family.

Universal's "Collector's Edition" DVD, which blazes screenwriter Julian Fellowes' deserved





*Maggie Smith turns in one of the best performances of her screen career in Robert Altman's drawing room mystery, GOSFORD PARK.*

Oscar win, is presented in 2.28:1 anamorphic widescreen, with optional English or Spanish subtitles, and Dolby Digital or 5.1 Surround soundtracks all the better to appreciate Altman's layered sound design. Its sixteen chapters seem a little stingy for such a long and crowded film. The transfer is excellent, though Andrew Dunn's cinematography is in the established Altman tradition of privileging the actors' work over the DP's, which means some smudgy dark moments. However, this is still a beautifully art-directed, lit and shot film and a second look, once you've got all the relationships straight in your head, reveals an enormous amount of detail, from the movie magazine pin-ups in Elsie's room ("I think the American stars have more oomph") to the precise placements of table settings.

The extras are all worthwhile: a conventional but serviceable making-of featurette and a shorter segment on "the accuracy of **GOSFORD PARK**" that includes interviews with veteran servants retained as technical advisors and a videotaped Q&A

session with a panel of before-and behind-the-scenes people (which reveals, among other things, that Northam can do perfect vocal imitations of several of his co-stars); trailers for the film and its soundtrack album (Jeremy Northam did all his own singing and much of his piano-playing, augmented by his musician brother Christopher Northam); and filmographies for cast and filmmakers that tend to dwell on recent credits.

Over 20m of deleted scenes, with optional Altman commentary, fill in a bit more of the mystery by discussing a disputed new will, develop the theme in a discussion about what the servants might do if and when the house is shut down or sold off, and resurrect dropped subplots. Also: glimpses of "the first focus group" as Weissman asks a servant if he's ever heard of Ray Milland while arguing against his casting in the Chan movie, Bates decanting port in a perfectly-played scene before delightfully corpsing as cut is called and a look at the upstairs bathroom ("there's another of your lovely

sets, Steve, that didn't make the film"). In their unfinished state, the scenes show what Altman footage looks and sounds like before it is tweaked to direct the audience's attention to one bit of business rather than another: his technique is to mike every character and have them talk naturally, then bring conversations to the fore in the sound mix—here, everyone speaks at the same level.

The two commentary tracks are also excellent. Altman is joined, uncredited, by his production designer son Stephen Altman and producer David Levy, who prompt the director to be more revealing than he has been on earlier solo commentary efforts (cf: **NASHVILLE**), while Fellowes (hitherto best known as a character actor in the likes of **BABY—SECRET OF THE LOST LEGEND**) holds up his own unaccompanied, irrepressably bubbling on with a wealth of delightful detail (he points out the dangerous electric heater Stephen Altman put over the tub in the servants' bathroom). Altman reveals that he insisted



on a smattering of bad language to get an R rating because he didn't want kids seeing the film ("they wouldn't get it"), while the general consensus among his crowd is that Sir William (whose "weekend from Hell" ends badly) is hard done-by in the plot, showing again Altman's ability to sympathise with almost everyone, including the abusive victim and the victimised murderers (the circumstances of Sir William's death are loosely based on the killing of a British department store tycoon). Fellowes sets matters straight about the supposedly improvisational nature of Altman's approach, by pointing out the very few lines actually made up by the cast (notably Smith's "difficult color, green"), and checks off various anecdotes inspired by members of his own uppercrust family. —Kim Newman

## THE INDIAN TOMB

### *Das Indische Grabmal*

1921, Image Entertainment,  
DD-2.0, \$29.99, 211m 18s,  
DVD-0

Adapted by Fritz Lang from the 1917 novel by wife Thea von Harbou (who co-wrote many of her husband's early scripts but remained in Germany when Lang fled the Third Reich in 1933), **THE INDIAN TOMB** continued a bid by the post-WWI German film industry to profit from the cinematic vogue for epics in the style of Giovanni Pastrone's **CABIRIA** (1914) and D.W. Griffith's **INTOLERANCE** (1916). Directed by Joe May, a Viennese industrialist turned filmmaker, **THE INDIAN TOMB** is a deliberately paced but impressively shot two-part *großfilme* (literally, "large film"—what we now call an "epic") set in colonial India.

To build a temple honoring his lost love Princess Savitri, Prince Ayan III (Conrad Veidt) retains the services of British architect Herbert Rowland (Olaf Fönss, the "perfect creature" of Otto Rippert's six-part **Homunculus** serial of 1916). To Rowland's dismay, the princess turns out to be very much alive and a prisoner in Ayan's compound. Complicating matters is the arrival of Rowland's fiancée Irene (Mia May, wife of the director), who traces "the white sahib" to the raj's palace only to become another of its miserable captives. When Rowland is afflicted by a leper's curse, the Prince offers Irene a cure at a terrible cost: "The offended God of Penance demands a sacrifice!"

Late in life, Fritz Lang claimed he had been slated to helm **Das Indische Grabmal** as a follow-up to his earlier exotic two-parter **Die Spinnen** [US: **SPIDERS**, 1918-19], until Joe May insinuated himself into the production just before shooting. (Lang's commitment to finishing **Die Spinnen** also prevented him from directing **THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI**, which ultimately went to Robert Wiene.) **THE INDIAN TOMB** does boast a decidedly Langian atmosphere, with subterranean passages and vaulted temples serving as conduits for intrigue, deception and adventure laced—*natürlich*—with a touch of the Supernatural. To hold Rowland in his power, Ayan employs a mystical yogi (Bernhard Goetzke, the "weary death" of Lang's **DESTINY**), whom he has revived from a premature burial. Although Olaf Fönss and Mia May make for some stodgy heroics, Erna Morrena (as Princess Savitri) and **SIEGFRIED**'s Paul Richter (as the British soldier whose love has

cost the princess her freedom) pick up the romantic slack, while the master/slave relationship of Veidt and Goetzke recalls **CALIGARI** (in which Veidt earned cinematic immortality as the murderous somnambulist Cesare). Characteristically, director May lets several scenes run on too long (Ayan's revival of the yogi takes up an entire reel) and allows the film's most fascinating character to disappear without comment. In the serial's second half, the action picks up considerably, with surprisingly grim fates meted out to three of its principals. The German enthusiasm for American Westerns is evident in one extended shoot-out (the *Punjab* equivalent of a cabin siege) and a climactic chase across a chasm spanned by the requisite rickety rope bridge. **THE INDIAN TOMB**'s vaulting sets were designed by Otto Hunte, who would again work with Lang on the two-part **Der Niebelungen** and the landmark sci-fi parable **METROPOLIS**. The invigorating cinematography (which avails itself of some primitive but pleasing in-camera trickery) was by Werner Brandes, who sat out the second World War in Switzerland.

Although Fritz Lang's fingerprints are all over **THE INDIAN TOMB** (which he would remake for producer Artur Brauner in color upon his return to Germany in the Fifties), one shouldn't entirely rule out the contributions of Joe May. Like Lang, Michael Curtiz and Billy Wilder, May belonged to the Vienna Diaspora that quit the crumbling Austro-Hungarian empire for Berlin, where his independent film company would merge (along with Paul Davidson's Projektion-A.G. Union, Erich Pommer's Decla-Bioskop and the Danish





*Prince Ayan (the great Conrad Veidt) revives the corpse of a Yogi (Bernhard Goetzke) in the seminal German adventure fantasy, **THE INDIAN TOMB**.*

Nordisk-Film, among others) with the conglomerate known as UFA (Universum Film Aktien Gesellschaft). In 1933, May followed Lang to Paris (where he directed a French language remake of his last German film) and later to America, where he earned a contract with Universal and churned out such bijou fodder as **THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES** and **THE INVISIBLE MAN RETURNS** (on which he would employ the services of aspiring screenwriter and fellow émigré Curt Siodmak). Like too many Berlin film directors who had the historic misfortune not to be affiliated with German Expressionism, May's reputation has suffered over the years and his contributions to film history are largely forgotten; temperamental to a fault (and

never fluent in English), May was unable to establish himself as a top director in the States. Eventually quitting showbiz entirely, May and his wife opened The Blue Danube restaurant in Hollywood and held court there until May's death in 1954.

Perhaps Image Entertainment's release of **THE INDIAN TOMB** will shed a little light back on the neglected director (whose career high point was his pre-*noir* "street film" **Asphalt** [1929]). Produced and overseen by David Shepard, **THE INDIAN TOMB** comes to DVD courtesy of Water Bearer Films and looks exceptionally fine. Although there are the expected emulsion blemishes, the fullframe image is startlingly clear (as in many German films of this era, the intricate set design

boasts more personality than many of the performers) and the source materials reflect the original tinting. The newly translated English intertitles are well-integrated and the accompanying orchestral score, compiled and orchestrated by Ulrich Reudel and performed by Tiger Hof Kapelli, serves the material splendidly, neither condescending to the film's vintage nor rubbing the viewer's nose in atonal modernity. There are no extras or anything in the way of a production history to place the film in a context that would give its presentation more meaning, but the DVD is attractively packaged (the menu screens make use of a coiled cobra icon) and the disc has been encoded with 20 chapters. —Richard Harland Smith



## THE STUNT MAN: SPECIAL EDITION

1980, Anchor Bay Entertainment,  
DD-5.1 & DD-2.0/DTS/MA/16:9/  
LB/CC/+, 130m 34s, \$19.98,  
DVD-0

## THE SINISTER SAGA OF MAKING "THE STUNT MAN"

2000, Anchor Bay Entertainment,  
DD-1.0/CC, 114m 21s, \$19.98,  
DVD-0

Wonderful, wise, funny and philosophical, **THE STUNT MAN**—which we originally reviewed in VW 48:34—is director Richard Rush's crowning achievement. Primarily a black comedy with elements of fantasy, mystery, and romance, it employs the illusion inherent in the filmmaking process as a means to explore reality, identity, memory, and—perhaps most importantly—art as a means of making decisions on how to live one's life. Although the film has developed a strong set of admirers in the two decades since its release, it has only received a fullframe treatment on VHS (and a full-frame treatment on laserdisc almost twenty years ago). Happily, Anchor Bay has rectified that situation with a handsome presentation of the film on DVD. In addition, ABE has also released a companion volume of sorts, Rush's excellent documentary about the making of **THE STUNT MAN**, titled **THE SINISTER SAGA OF MAKING THE STUNT MAN**, containing plenty of minutiae to satisfy the most ardent devotees.

Steve Railsback (best remembered as Charles Manson in the 1975 TV drama **HELTHER SKELTER**) plays Cameron, a Vietnam veteran on the run from the law. He hides out by taking the job of a stunt man for a film

company shooting an anti-war drama set during the First World War. In doing so, he places himself at the mercy of the film's flamboyant, vaguely sinister director, Eli Cross (Peter O'Toole). Cross—a master manipulator and keen reader of his colleagues' psyches—wields a god-like control over both the set and the personal lives of his cast and crew. As Cameron stunt-doubles the film's leading man (Adam Roarke), and becomes involved in a romantic relationship with the film's alluring leading lady, Nina Franklin (Barbara Hershey), he becomes increasingly paranoid, believing that Cross wants to kill through his demand for increasingly dangerous stunts. Moreover, Cameron and Nina's relationship is jeopardized when Cameron learns that Nina was once romantically involved with Cross, a discovery that elicits his jealous anger because it conjures up memories of his past life, and the series of events which led to him being wanted by the authorities.

Before directing **THE STUNT MAN**, Rush had directed low-budget Westerns and biker films (for instance, US Films' 1967 **HELL'S ANGELS ON WHEELS**, starring Jack Nicholson), after which he moved on to mainstream projects such as **GETTING STRAIGHT** (1970), one of Harrison Ford's earliest films. This latter picture was successful enough to allow Rush to pursue the development of **THE STUNT MAN**, although, as fate would have it, the film was not actually made until many years later. Some cast members, such as Adam Roarke, had appeared in AIP films, as did Barbara Hershey (1972's **BOXCAR BERTHA**). Clearly, Rush had a vision: although based on the 1970

novel by Paul Brodeur, Rush and co-screenwriter Lawrence B. Marcus added a number of elements, including the device of having Cameron on the run from the law. In the documentary, Rush reveals that several directors were interested in adapting Brodeur's novel, including François Truffaut, who adapted certain of its ideas for his film **DAY FOR NIGHT [La Nuit Americaine]**, 1973]. We had always been aware of the resemblance of certain features of **THE STUNT MAN** to Truffaut's film about the making of a film; Rush thus solves the mystery by revealing that the two films had the same source.

ABE's disc, authored by Crest National, is outstanding. Letterboxed at 1.75:1, with 16:9 optional playback, the colors are rich and vibrant, with accurate fleshtones and crisp hues. Although this is the first-ever presentation of the film with stereo tracks, it has also been given a remixed DD-5.1 EX soundtrack, courtesy of Chace Digital. We prefer the DTS-encoded soundtrack, however, as it delivers richer detail and a more solid bass, while at the same time enhancing the subtleties of Dominic Frontiere's fine musical score.

The disc is also loaded with supplements. Three theatrical trailers are offered: the teaser (48s), the original theatrical trailer (2m 5s), and a version of the theatrical trailer in Spanish (1m 58s). Two deleted scenes, totaling about 6m, include a rather audacious 3m 15s sequence at the local police station, in which Eli and members of his cast arrive to rescue leading man Roarke, who has been arrested as a result of his propositioning a sailor. (Devotees should note that a third, and perhaps more significant,





*Peter O'Toole as Eli Cross, the all-seeing, all-powerful devil director of Richard Rush's **THE STUNT MAN**.*

deleted scene, 5m 4s in length, which Rush avers was the first scene written for the script and which he believed essential to the film and would therefore never be cut, appears on **THE SINISTER SAGA** disc. The reason it was eventually cut, he reveals, was the audience's strong puritanical reaction upon learning of Nina's promiscuous sex life.) There are also several dozen production and behind-the-scenes stills, as well as what seems to be a complete portfolio of advertising art as it went through various stages, concluding with the now iconic image of Peter O'Toole as the devilish figure-behind-the-camera. DVD-ROM features (in Acrobat format) include the complete screenplay, as well as Rush's extensive notes made over several years, prior to and during actual production. The keepcase also contains a reproduction of the original theatrical poster ("If God could do the tricks we can do, he'd be a happy man").

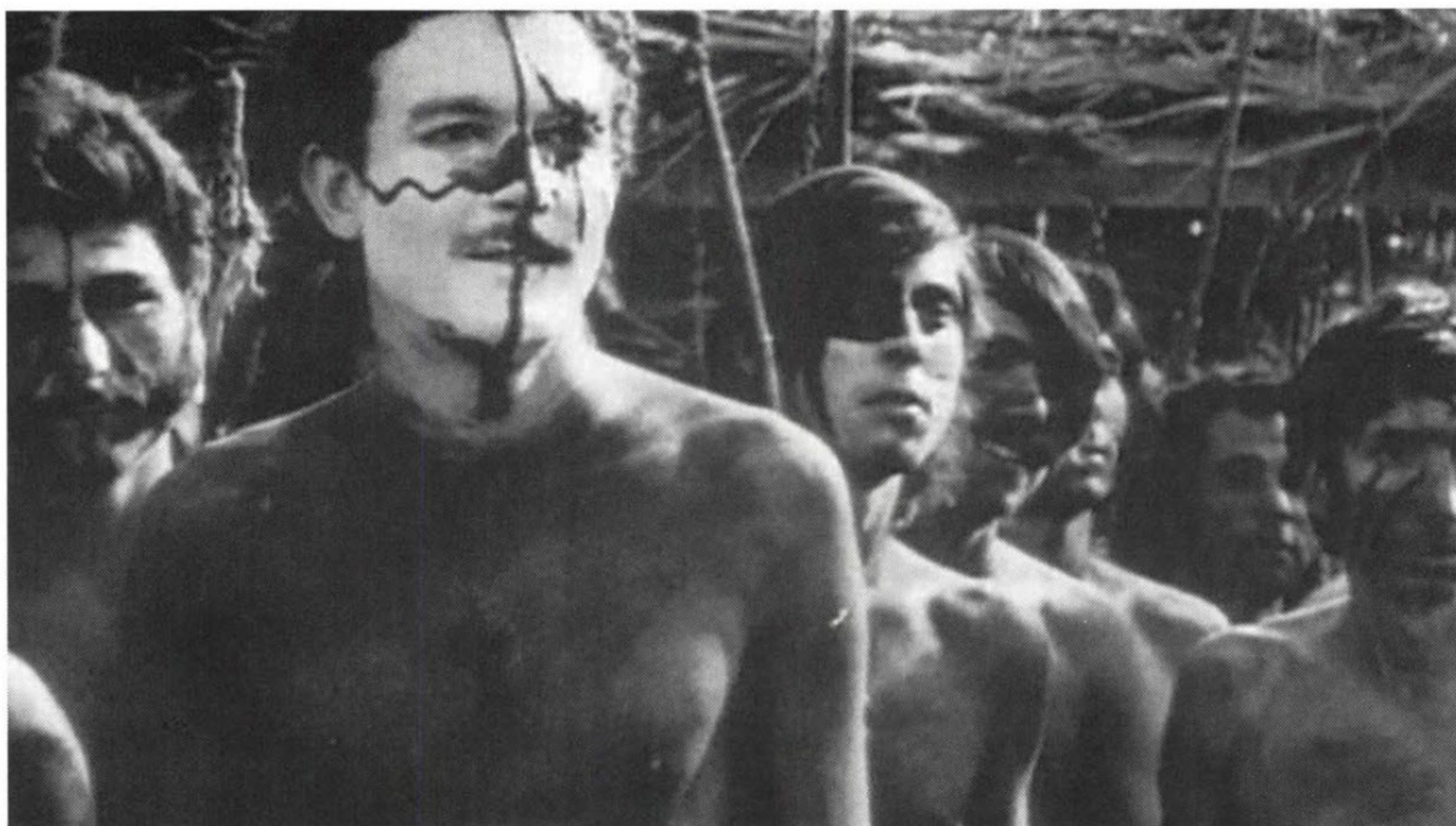
Given the depth and breadth of bonus materials, the disc's

commentary track would thus seem to be redundant, but in fact it is not. Consisting of comments by Rush (recorded separately) and stars Peter O'Toole, Steve Railsback, Barbara Hershey, Alex Rocco, Sharon Farrell and stunt coordinator Chuck Bail, the commentary is loaded with fascinating anecdotes and interesting insights. Among the more interesting revelations is O'Toole's comment that he modelled the character of Eli Cross on David Lean. And although the on-screen rivalry between Cameron and Cross is pitch-perfect, Railsback reveals what a consummate professional O'Toole is, and what a pleasure it was to work with him on the film. All of the actors exhibit a sincere admiration for the picture, and their pride in being associated with it. In fact, their performances in **THE STUNT MAN** restored the then-sagging careers of both O'Toole and Hershey.

If the supplements on this disc aren't enough to satisfy you, there is always the documentary. Its nearly two-hour running time

allows director-writer-producer Rush to discuss virtually every aspect of the film's history, from its initial development, the changes in the script caused by the many years' delay in production, his casting decisions, the development of the advertising artwork, the difficulty of obtaining proper venues for early screenings, and its eventual critical acclaim and garnering of award nominations. By turns playful and serious, spiced with interviews with actors Railsback, Hershey, O'Toole, cinematographer Mario Tosi (**SOME CALL IT LOVING**) and others, the documentary's in-depth coverage of all aspects of the film's production will probably appeal most to the film's ardent fans, but the documentary also implicitly contains an important lesson about the values of wit, resilience, and perseverance in a highly competitive business, as well as revealing its director's indomitable spirit. Some good old-fashioned guts on the part of Richard Rush also helped **THE STUNT MAN**'s run for acclaim as





"White French guys in Kiss makeup"  
—the cannibal tribe of Jess Franco's embarrassing MONDO KANIBALEN.

well, particularly when he details his strategy for dealing with one of the film's opponents, an ominous figure he names "D.B." (for "dumbo"), an enemy within the production company who strived mightily to sabotage the film's release. Rush believed in his film, and the film's eventual nominations and awards proved he was correct. (Although filmed in 1978, it did not get a wide release by 20th Century-Fox until 1980, when among other things, it earned three Academy Award nominations, and six Golden Globe nominations.)

Shot on digital video and transferred directly to disc, **THE SINISTER SAGA**'s picture is excellent and its DD-2.0 mono soundtrack is just fine. Although we received the individual DVD packages for review, ABE has also issued the two discs together in a Limited Special Edition package of 100,000 copies, priced at \$34.98. —Rebecca & Sam Umland

## Imports

### MONDO KANNIBALEN

"Cannibal World"  
aka *Une fille pour les Cannibales*, *Sexo Canibal*, *The Cannibals*, *White Cannibal Queen*  
1980, Laser Paradise (Germany), D-2.0/LB/+, \$29.95, 83m 32s, DVD-2 (PAL)

### JUNGFRAU UNTER KANNIBALEN

"The Virgin and the Cannibals"  
aka *MANDINGO MANHUNTER*, *MANHUNTER*, *THE DEVIL HUNTER*, *Il cacciatore di uomini*, *Chasseurs d'hommes*  
1980, Laser Paradise (Germany), D-2.0/LB/+, \$29.95, 89m 6s, DVD-2 (PAL)

In 1980, Jess Franco turned his inexhaustible camera toward horror's most repugnant flavor of the moment: the Italian cannibal film. His earlier works had

occasionally touched on carnivorous horror, usually in eroticized ways that suggested *double entendres* about the gasping pleasure of being "eaten"—to take two examples, 1973's *La Comtesse Perverse* (a carnivorous twist on **THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME**) and 1977's *ILSA THE WICKED WARDEN* (aka *Greta*, *Haus ohne Mann*, which climaxed with Dyanne Thorne being literally torn to pieces and devoured by hungry prison inmates, a spectacle intercut with stock footage of actual animal predation). In these films, Franco managed to put his own imprint on the topic, but when he made these two films—shot back to back in the Rio Safari Park Elche, an environmental tourist trap not far from Alicante—his apparent goal was to forge quick, saleable imitations of the Italian cannibal films of the moment. The pair of them topline ruddy Italian actor "Al Cliver" aka Pier Luigi Conti (**ZOMBIE**), but fall conspicuously short of the



Italian films they imitate, lacking any sense of excitement, transgression, or revulsion. Previously released in America on VHS in unsatisfactory pan&scan transfers, both of these movies have now been released on Region 2 DVD in Germany as part of Laser Paradise's "Blood Edition" series, which is identified as "Red Edition" on the discs themselves.

Under its original West German video title, **Mondo Cannibale 3—Die Blonde Göttin** ("Cannibal World 3—The Blonde Goddess"), the first of these movies was one of approximately 40 horror video releases banned in West Germany in the 1990s—for what reason, we can't imagine, as it's fairly weak tea. Now, thanks to a loophole in German law, it is back under a new (video-generated) title, **Jess Franco's Mondo Kannibalen**. The movie starts off with a bang as Elizabeth Taylor is stripped nude on shipdeck and eaten alive by cannibals—actually, it's Pamela Stanford (**Lorna... l'Exorciste**) playing Elizabeth, the hapless wife of Prof. Jeremy Taylor (Al Cliver), a Columbus, Ohio-born botanist puttering down the Amazon on the good ship Tuc-away in search of rare floral specimens. Thomas loses his wife—and his own left arm—to the cannibals, while his young daughter Lena (Anouchka, the little girl from **ZOMBIE LAKE**, actually the daughter of producer Daniel Lesoeur) manages to escape the feeding frenzy by bolting into the jungle, where she knocks herself unconscious. Ten years later, Taylor appeals to wealthy Charles Fenton (Eurociné perennial Olivier Mathot) to bankroll a rescue expedition, and his jet-setting party is soon yachting into the heart of darkness

with lots of sexy women in tow—including a dark-and-curly-wigged Lina Romay, billed as "Candy Coster," who is shown reading Sidney Sheldon's **BLOODLINE**. Attacked and captured by the cannibal tribe (mostly white French guys in KISS makeup), the survivors are staggered to discover that Thomas' daughter (now curvaceous Sabrina Siani) has not only survived, but been adopted as the white Queen of the flesh-eaters (who curiously slaughter their prey while spouting Fu Manchu-like "kill the white man" invective). Recognizing her father, Lena frees him and those of his companions still alive, an act which is countenanced by the warrior chieftan Yakaké (Antonio Mayans) until Taylor tries abducting his daughter back to the States, which puts the ire of the tribe hot on their heels. Franco himself makes a cameo as Matthias, a parasitical international tradesman, in a scene with Cliver and Romay.

In the mid-1980s, this movie somehow bypassed Wizard Video, which generally attracted Eurociné product like flypaper, surfacing instead as a very poor quality, pan&scan VHS release from Video City, whose color palette was mostly limited to khaki green and salmon pink. That version, **WHITE CANNIBAL QUEEN** (90m 16s), was one of the first Franco films we saw, and it was not an encouraging discovery, comparing poorly to just about everything except Julio Tabernero's **CANNIBAL TERROR** (shot at the same time on the same locations). However, the more Franco films one sees, one becomes more attentive and susceptible to their personal markings—their winks and secret handshakes—so we

were hopeful that this one had improved over the years, with our education. Unfortunately, 130+ films and variants later, we find that this film doesn't have much to offer seasoned Franco viewers either, other than some shallow juxtapositions between the jungle and the yacht which beggar the question "Who are the *real* cannibals?" and some ugly, beef-and-latex-chewing scenes that employ slow-motion and reverberated screams to eroticize the act of cannibalism. At least no animals were killed for this production, nor was any animal death stock footage utilized; even the film's cannibalism seems highly incidental, as its real focus is on playing with Burroughsian jungle myth-making with a '40s serial sensibility.

Though clearly barrel-bottom Franco, any thorough collector of his work will feel the need to upgrade from the Video City abomination, and this Laser Paradise "Blood Edition" disc provides that opportunity. As with Image Entertainment's recent domestic release of **OASIS OF THE ZOMBIES**, Eurociné has provided their master with new, video-generated titles to reaffirm Franco's paternity. (The original English credits said "A Film by Franco Prosperi... Directed by Jess Franco.") The film is clumsily photographed, sometimes in deliberately soft- or non-focus, with many scenes using the zoom lens to capture various jungle and lake set-ups from safe distances, resulting in shaky, tenuous compositions that can be obliterated by the actors' slightest movements. Therefore, it's impossible to tell how well the 1.85:1 letterboxing approximates the original framing, but the film is far more readable here than





*Ursula Buchfellner as a kidnapped movie star held for ransom in a cannibal-infested jungle in Franco's JUNGFRAU UNTER KANNIBALEN.*

in the Video City version, and thus better able to entertain those it can. The transfer is acceptable, though challenged by a lot of bad day-for-night photography that gives many scenes a mildly grainy, through-a-nylon complexion with occasional, faint artifacting; in one dark close-up of Mayans, the artifacting becomes more pronounced and pulses slightly whenever the shot becomes motionless. Colors are okay, naturalistically muted with adequate fleshtones. The two-channel mono PCM audio sounds fine, complimenting the film's best ingredient, a jungle lounge score credited to Roberto Pregadio, but which often sounds like the work of Stelvio Cipriani or, in

the case of one specific cue, **DAWN OF THE DEAD**-era Goblin. (It's possible, given the low budget, that Pregadio simply edited the soundtrack together from library tracks by Cipriani, Goblin and others.) Only six chapters are provided.

The dialogue is 95% German, without subtitles, with short portions of missing soundtrack patched by the English dub (with unremovable German subtitles in the frame)—providing monolingual viewers with just enough information to clarify the essential plot details and character relationships. The film is so minimally plotted that most people will find the German version easy to follow anyway, and perhaps more amusing than it really is,

with Yakaké's apoplectic, racist rants giving the strong impression of Hitler in a loincloth.

**Mondo Kannibalen** has a converted NTSC length of 86m 39s, which is comparable to the most complete version previously available, the long-OOP VHS release from Cinehollywood (UK) entitled **MONDO CANNIBALE** (86m 42s). With letterboxing added to the deal, this German DVD release stacks up as definitive.

Franco's next stab at flesh-eating, here called **Jungfrau unter Kannibalen**, was previously released in America on VHS in the mid-1980s by Trans World Entertainment (TWE) under the title **MANHUNTER** (91m 44s). The film opens by crudely cutting back-and-forth between two unrelated, yet similar situations: a nude jungle girl being carried by her tribal leaders to meet her destiny as a virgin sacrifice, and the abduction of actress Laura Crawford (PLAYBOY Playmate Ursula Buchfellner) from the sunken tub of her hotel penthouse by three kidnappers (Gisela Hahn, Werner Pochath, Antonio de Cabo). The stories synch-up when Laura is spirited away to the jungle by her captors, all of them unaware that the area is home to a giant, buck-naked cannibal with protuberant, bloodshot eyes, who is worshipped as a god by the local tribe. (He resembles one of the faces on their totem pole.) Laura's Beverly Hills producer is sent a ransom note demanding \$6,000,000 for her safe return, to which he responds by hiring Viet Nam vet/mercenary Peter Weston (Al Cliver) and his partner Jack ("Robert Foster" aka Antonio Mayans)—still rattled by Nam flashbacks, for no pertinent reason—who try to swap the actress for fake money, a plan which backfires and results in



much mutual shooting and chaos. During the fireworks, the scantily-clad Laura flees into the jungle, where she is intercepted by the tribesmen (led by scrawny, bald, beer-bellied Yul Sanders, who appeared in numerous Franco films of this period) and tied to a tree as a gift to their god, while a nude native woman celebrates by thrashing around on a bamboo mat like a smelt on a hot griddle.

A marginal improvement over **Mondo Kannibalen**, **Jungfrau unter Kannibalen** is curiously even messier and half-baked than its predecessor. The opening attempt at synchronistic storytelling is edited without any sense of rhythm, the photography often looks badly cropped even in this widescreen presentation, the music cues seem to have been incompletely dropped-in as an afterthought, and the horror scenes (vaselined POV shots, close-shots of the "monster" pretending to claw at women's bare stomachs and sucking up great sloppy lengths of ziti) are silly. There is also the remarkably absurd scene of a henchman discovering one of the lead baddies hanging upside-down, dead, in a tree, and staring up at the spectacle as blood rains freely down on his face, without bothering to step out of the way or even shut his gaping mouth. What this film has over its companion piece is moderately better production values (there's even a helicopter crash effect) and a decent cast that works hard to keep the proceedings from unfolding too passively. Buchfellner and Hahn provide attractive scenery, and Pochath (from **MOSQUITO**, reviewed VW 57:63) and especially de Cabo add a helpful dash of human menace, with the latter

raping Buchfellner in her chains, as Hahn settles back to savor the view from a hammock. The fact that two prominent secondary characters perish without acknowledgement or casting the slightest pall over the upbeat fade-out, is inexplicable and nudges the whole toward a fairly speedy critical dismissal.

**Jungfrau unter Kannibalen** (odd title, since there's only one cannibal and the damsel-in-distress is no virgin) looks worse than **Mondo Kannibalen**. The 1.85:1 transfer leaves the colors washed-out, the stock as over-exposed as it can be without the whites blooming, and the resolution noisy; the company name, and the presence of an advert for the label's past laserdisc releases on the menu, suggests that this DVD was mastered from an old, and not very good, LD transfer. Adding to the curiosity value is the fact that Eurociné cobbled the source materials together from various prints; at 41:36, a shot actually dissolves into its own continuation, with the white ocean in the background suddenly turning blue, and as with the companion release, there are a couple of instances of English dialogue subtitled in German. Though the German main titles are video-generated, Eurociné did not take the opportunity to credit Franco, as they seem to be doing now with all their formerly pseudonymous Franco releases; the direction here is, as before, credited to "Clifford Brown."

Despite the faults of presentation, this is nevertheless the most complete version of the film (one of the UK's original "Video Nasties," incidentally) ever released, which will endear it to Franco fans; with an NTSC

converted running time of 92m 48s, it runs more than a full minute longer than the TWE release, adding some frontally-nude shots of the cannibal god and most of the female cast. On both "Blood Edition" discs, seven German trailers are also included for the label's other releases in this series, including **ARMY OF DARKNESS**, **BRAIN DEAD** (actually an extended scene from the riotous climax), **CANNIBAL FEROX**, **ANGEL OF THE NIGHT**, **HELLRAISER 3**, **DELLAMORTE DELLAMORE** and **DAY OF THE DEAD**.

For some reason, these Laser Paradise discs are not listed as available from Amazon.de, but both are available for \$29.95 each from Luminous Film and Video Wurks (PO Box 2, Medford NY 11763 USA; 631-289-1644, fax: 631-654-3637), a reliable domestic importer whose service we enthusiastically recommend. The discs can also be bought at their website, [www.lfvw.com](http://www.lfvw.com). —Tim Lucas

## MONDO KANNIBALEN 4. TIEL NACKT UNTER WILDEN

*"Cannibal World, Part 4:  
Naked And Wild"*

**El Tesoro de la Diosa Blanca**

*"The Treasure of the  
White Goddess"*

aka **Diamonds of Kilimandjaro**

1983, X-Rated Cult DVD,

DD-2.0/LB/+, \$24.98,

90m 31s, DVD-2 (PAL)

Pressed in a strictly limited run of only 500 copies, this German DVD marks the digital debut of a Jess Franco film that, its title notwithstanding, has nothing to do with his earlier cannibal movies, but is more interesting and entertaining than





The mask of a Blind Dead Templar is worn by one of the cannibals in Franco's *MONDO KANNIBALEN 4. TEIL*.

either of them. A pulpy elaboration on the premise of **WHITE CANNIBAL QUEEN**, it features Franco's recurring anti-hero Al Pereira ("Robert Foster" aka Antonio Mayans, reprising a role he played in 1982's *Botas Negros, Látigo de Cuero*) as the leader of a mercenary expedition sent into the heart of Africa by the bedridden Lady de Winter (Lina Romy, looking like the possessed Elke Sommer in **THE HOUSE OF EXORCISM**) to recover a fortune in diamonds, lost many years ago when a plane carrying her husband (Daniel White, Franco's longtime musical collaborator) and young daughter Diana disappeared there. Besides the ever-present dangers of wildlife and the murderous native tribe, the Mabutos, Pereira and company (Javier Maiza, Olivier Mathot, Aline Mess) are also threatened by the internal stress of drink, greed and hanky-panky. To their surprise, the group are saved on more than one occasion by Diana (Katje Bienert, the star of Franco's 1980 *Eugenie*)—now a young woman who rules over

the jungle as a benevolent female Tarzan, calling for assistance from her animal friends (a rhesus monkey, stock footage of a rhino named Bomba) as she swings from tree to tree—who wants Pereira to teach her how to make love after spying on one of his covert trysts.

Shot, like the cannibal films, in the Rio Safari Park Elche, this Spanish/French co-production encapsulates Franco's spirit as a demented rebuilder of fractured pop culture, combining elements of Burroughs' Tarzan novels, the MGM Tarzan films, Daphne Du Maurier's *REBECCA*, with elements of the erotic. In comparison to this German-language version, the English version (**THE DIAMONDS OF KILIMANDJARO**) conveys a much sweeter and kookier mood, characterized by an endearingly silly sequence—not included here—of Diana yodeling hellos to enough stock footage animals to fill an ark. Collectors of Spanish horror will be interested in the Mabuto tribe, a couple of whom are wearing bewhiskered skull masks that

previously served as faces of the undead Knights Templar in Amando de Ossorio's "Blind Dead" films.

Though the 1.78:1 letterboxing is welcome and adds to the film's scenic balance, the film doesn't look all that great on disc. It shares the noisy complexion of Laser Paradise's *Jungfrau unter Kannibalen*, and the resolution is only slightly sharper than VHS. The gold-and-green color scheme quickly becomes monotonous, and the brighter scenes lose detail while the dark scenes never quite manage true blacks. The two-channel mono audio is no more than adequate, and only nine chapter marks are provided. It's better than watchable, but doesn't compare at all to the lovely color photos included in the keeppcase's four-page enclosure.

There are also some bonus items, both related and unrelated. The latter include an unidentified music video about an inflatable love doll and a trailer for Andreas Bethman's forthcoming horror film *Rossa Venezia*, and the former include a German trailer for **LUST FOR FRANKENSTEIN** (1m 6s) and a 5m 44s featurette on Katje Bienert. This charming tribute includes pictures of the actress as an infant and toddler, contact sheets from modelling shoots, the entire amusing trailer for *Die Schulfrauen vom Treffpunkt Zoo* ("The Schoolgirls at Treffpunkt Zoo"), a few more recent shots, and ends with a look at her autograph.

Available in limited supply from Xploited Cinema (2183 Pinebrook Trail, Cuyahoga Falls OH 44223 USA; [www.xploitedcinema.com](http://www.xploitedcinema.com)), where VISA, MasterCard, personal check, money order and payments through PayPal ([www.paypal.com](http://www.paypal.com)) are accepted. Add \$4.00 for postage and handling. —Tim Lucas





## BIBLIO WATCHDOG

# SPAWN OF SKULL ISLAND

By George E. Turner with Orville Goldner,  
expanded and revised by Michael H. Price  
with Douglas Turner.

Luminary Press

9721 Britinay Lane, Baltimore MD 21234

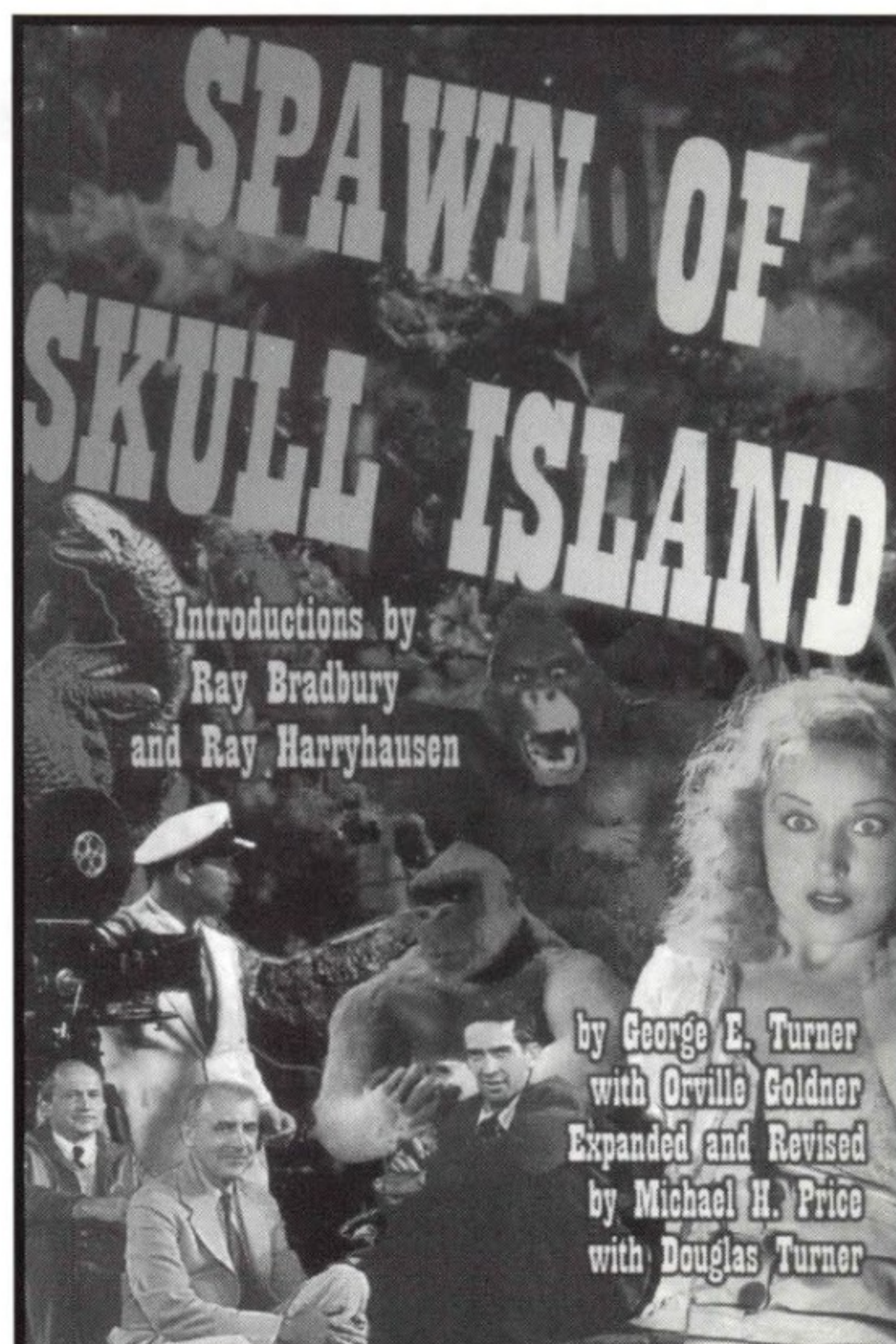
410-665-1198, [www.midmar.com](http://www.midmar.com)

256 pp., \$40.00 (hardcover) plus \$4.00 shipping.

**Reviewed by**  
**Anthony Ambrogio**

**T**HE MAKING OF KING KONG emerged in 1975 as one of the most important in the early wave of books on fantastic cinema, and certainly *the* essential guide to that seminal simian/saurian movie—a complete record of the picture’s genesis, personnel, production, and critical and popular reception. Anybody who doesn’t have that long out-of-print volume (A.S. Barnes hardcover, Ballentine trade paperback) can buy an expensive used copy... or, better yet, acquire the recently revised and expanded incarnation from Luminary Press, SPAWN OF SKULL ISLAND. Lucky readers who already own MAKING *could* do without SPAWN, but that’s like sticking with the tape when you can upgrade to the DVD.

Both books reflect the vision and enthusiasm of the late journalist/film historian/artist/**KING KONG** aficionado George E. Turner. MAKING is co-credited to Orville Goldner (one of **KONG**’s key effects technicians), but SPAWN editor Michael H. Price quotes Goldner’s candid admission that, “George really did all the work on this book. I’m more of a glorified source and fact-checker than any kind of author.” Turner, however, ever gracious with praise and modest about his own accomplishments, “realized that Dr. Goldner’s good name had put him in touch with sources deeper than might otherwise have proved attainable”: Turner’s text was made richer by the cooperation of Goldner’s surviving colleagues, and Turner was happy to “top bill” Goldner.



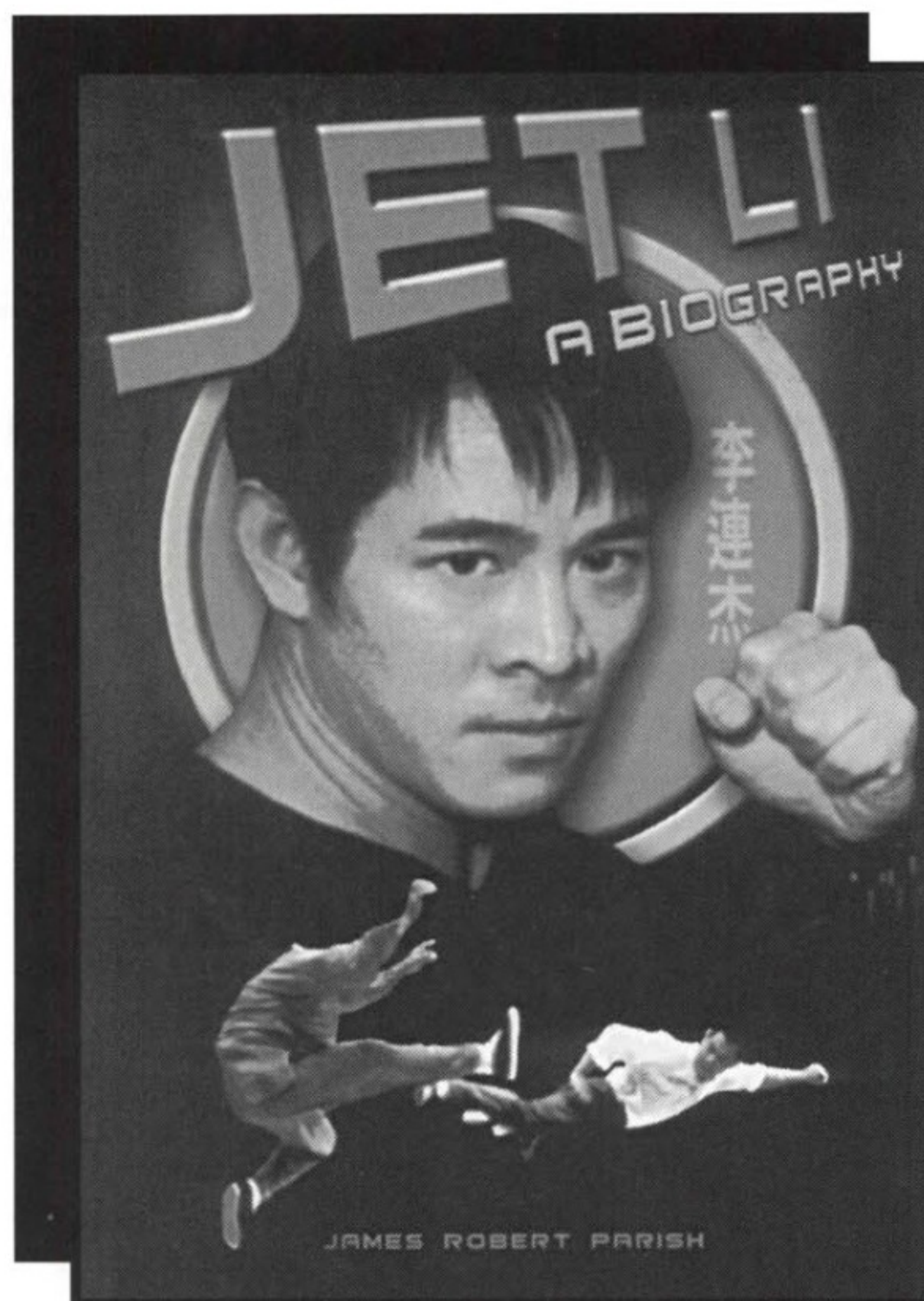
The guiding hand behind SPAWN OF SKULL ISLAND is the multi-talented Price, Turner’s frequent co-writer, who served as fact-checker on MAKING and who here carefully follows Turner’s design for the expanded edition he didn’t live to see, giving us the “quarto” version of Turner’s “folio,” so to speak—restoring much of the Bard of Texas’s original typescript, “altered arbitrarily, either well-meaningly by co-author Orville Goldner or recklessly by the first publisher.” A comparison of MAKING and SPAWN’s chapters shows that paragraphs remain the same, but various



sentences now read differently. (Price, as modest as Turner, downplays his own considerable contributions to *SPAWN*, choosing instead to defer to the man with whom he co-authored *FORGOTTEN HORRORS*, *HUMAN MONSTERS*, and other books, and additionally crediting Douglas Turner, George's son, who—like Goldner, I suspect—provided invaluable information but probably didn't write much.)

*SPAWN*'s structure apes *MAKING*'s, with several additions fore and aft: not one but two forewords (by Ray Bradbury and Ray Harryhausen); not only George Turner's original introduction but a new one by Michael Price; not only Turner's preface to the revised version but Price's 30-page "Preamble & Laundry List" (a survey of dinosaur and gorilla films from 1898 to 2000), and 36-page "Preludes, Prologues & Progeny: Kong & Crucial Kin"—a final chapter that replaces and elaborates upon *MAKING*'s appendices. There, the author(s) detailed 10 pictures relevant to the work of **KING KONG**'s directors/producers, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, and chief technician Willis O'Brien; here, they treat those and 14 others. Additional material includes the text of Schoedsack's 1971 "Song of Kong," Turner's "Ancient Great Plains" comic strip, and a promotional comic strip for the 1935 version of **SHE**.

MIDNIGHT MARQUEE publishers Sue and Gary J. Svehla, under their new Luminary Press imprint, have produced a splendid book in *SPAWN OF SKULL ISLAND*. Between hard covers, they've supplemented the revised text and new material with some 200 illustrations, most of them unique to this volume. The mostly half- and quarter-page pictures are smaller than those found in *MAKING*, with its plethora of full- and two-page spreads, but they're well chosen and generally sharper than the images in *MAKING*. (Compare, for example, the matte shot of Bruce Cabot and Kong: *MAKING*, p. 94; *SPAWN*, p. 132.) One might wish that *SPAWN* sported larger photos and two-column text for easier readability (as in *MAKING*), but these enhancements would have added pages, and therefore cost, to what is already a pricey venture. *SPAWN OF SKULL ISLAND* is offered in a limited, numbered edition and can be purchased directly from the publisher. You should buy it now, because used copies will someday go for a great deal more.



## THE CINEMA OF TSUI HARK

*By Lisa Morton*

*McFarland & Company, Box 611, Jefferson NC 28640; 246pp., \$45.00 Hardcover*

## JET LI: A BIOGRAPHY

*By James Robert Parish*

*Thunder's Mouth Press, 161 William St. 16th Floor New York NY 10038, 646-375-2570 210pp, \$17.95 Softcover*

## Reviewed by John Charles

**T**wo of Hong Kong cinema's pre-eminent figures are profiled in these new publications, one a labor of love, the other a rather faceless quickie. Lisa Morton's *THE CINEMA OF TSUI HARK* provides a thorough look at the Canton-born director, the most successful and best-known of the young filmmakers in the Hong Kong New Wave movement of the late '70s. All of the essential background is here, but this information is available elsewhere. The book's true value lies in the space it allots to Tsui himself, letting him discuss at length his influences (everything from Chinese culture to Japanese manga to American movies), his dream projects, his thoughts about the current state and future of HK cinema, how he became interested in giving the




spotlight to complex female characters (rather than conventional male protagonists), and so on. Tsui also comments on all of the major films he either directed or produced, and the author also provides coverage of the remaining titles (the book goes up to 1998's **KNOCK OFF** and includes brief notes on **TIME AND TIDE**, **THE LEGEND OF ZU**, and the still unreleased **BLACK MASK 2**). Morton writes with great passion, providing a worthy analysis of the director's filmography that accurately relays the sense-heightening thrills of Tsui's best work. Her enthusiasm is sometimes the book's undoing, however, particularly when she brands **THE EAST IS RED**—a chaotic and outlandish mess of a movie—as “one of the most audacious works of genius in the history of the fantasy film” and then fails to provide convincing evidence to support that lofty claim (even Tsui himself is dismissive of the final product). Equally unpersuasive are her plaudits for **KNOCK OFF**—one of two awful Jean-Claude Van Damme pictures Tsui helmed, and possibly the most embarrassing and ill-conceived production he ever signed.

There are also a few errors along the way: the write-up for **GREEN SNAKE** (1993) incorrectly lists Tien Feng as Hsui-xien, when the part is actually essayed by Taiwanese actor Wu Hsin-kuo, and the author also has Harold Sakata listed as actually playing the Oddjob lookalike in 1983's **ACES GO PLACES III: OUR MAN FROM BOND STREET**, though the actor died the previous year. More glaring is Morton's assertion that Loletta Lee Lai-chun started her career in Category III movies, when she was actually part of Raymond Wong's teen ensemble at Cinema City during the mid-'80s and appeared in only a handful of sex films during the early-'90s, before returning to mainstream work. Some inconsistencies are also evident. Morton refers to the 1992 **DRAGON INN** remake as **NEW DRAGON INN**, though “New” only appears in the Chinese title and, while we are told of the HK Film Award nominations each picture received, Morton does not reveal which prizes were won. She also neglects to mention that **SHANGHAI GRAND** was a feature remake of **THE BUND**, possibly the most famous HK TV miniseries to date and the vehicle that made Chow Yun-fat a superstar.

It can be hell for an English-speaking writer to get their facts straight when translations of personnel and character names vary wildly from source-to-source (including prints of the films themselves!), but Morton navigates this slippery slope more gracefully than several domestic publications we've read. Her book—the first dedicated to the man who has advanced HK cinema in more ways than any filmmaker—succeeds in offering a fine profile of a

remarkable talent. Unfortunately, McFarland has released it only as a \$45 hardcover, when it should have streeted as a \$25 paperback. As a result, **THE CINEMA OF TSUI HARK** is more likely to be found on library shelves than in the collections of HK cinema aficionados, who will find it of the most value.

In contrast, James Robert Parish's **JET LI: A BIOGRAPHY** is more of an assembly line effort. Parish has written over a hundred published biographies and reference books, but his subjects are generally Hollywood celebrities like Rosie O'Donnell and Whoopi Goldberg, and he lacks the passion for and knowledge of Chinese cinema apparent throughout Morton's book. That said, **JET LI** is not without interest for those who have just recently become fans of this extraordinary performer. The author provides thorough coverage of Li's phenomenal success as one of China's most gifted *wu shu* artists and his subsequent entry into movies. However, Parish apparently never met the actor at any point, so he relies heavily on quotes from Li's official website to relay his subject's thoughts. He also extensively quotes writers like Derek Elley, Andy Klein, Kevin Thomas, Mick LaSalle, Wade Major, and Lisa Morton. This has the effect of making his analysis seem more like an “instant book” concoction of handy opinions, rather than something consistent and genuine. Parish also occasionally makes the tiresomely common error among Western writers of referring to people by their first names (eg. “Hark” instead of “Tsui”) and there are also enough mistakes in regards to the particulars of important films, like **IRON MONKEY**, to suggest that the author has not seen them.

Some key events in Li's life are also glossed over. For example, the author cites Li not being cast in Tsui Hark's remake of **DRAGON INN** as proof of a growing rift between the two. In reality, Li's manager Jim Choi Chi-ming had tried to launch his own remake of the King Hu classic, but it fell apart when the triad-connected Choi was murdered by rival gangsters. His death was a key event of the time, showing just how great the triad infiltration of the HK movie industry was becoming, but Parish glosses over these events in a single paragraph, without even mentioning the man's name. By the time we get to coverage of the actor's American features to date (**LETHAL WEAPON 4**, **ROMEO MUST DIE**, **KISS OF THE DRAGON**, and **THE ONE**), the book has become little more than a deluxe press kit. Its utility as a research item is also compromised by the lack of an index and the filmography section contains a number of needless errors. —John Charles 





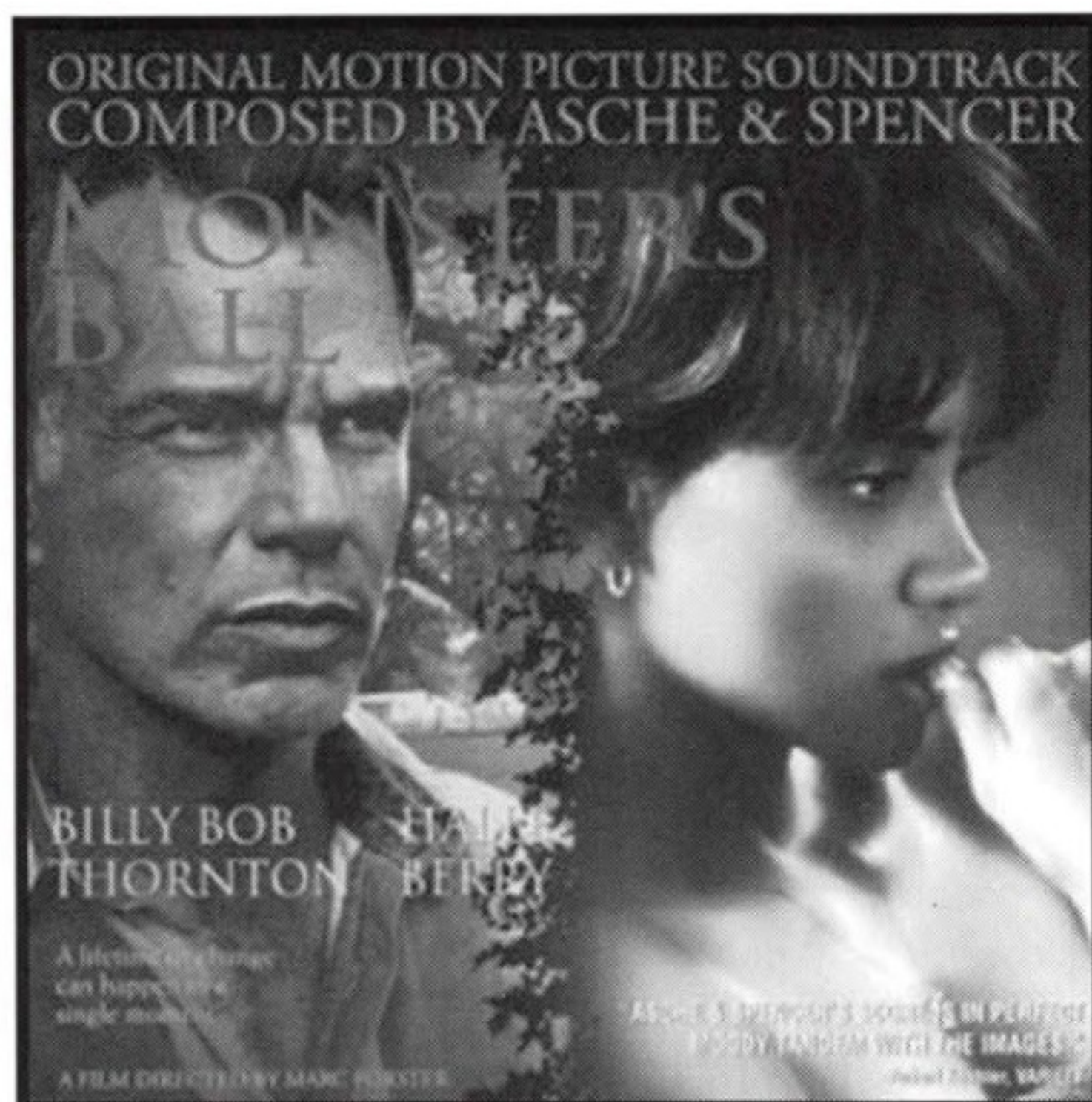
By Douglas E. Winter

## Monster's Ball

**"Small" films**—Hollywood-speak for "serious" productions lensed with B-movie budgets—sometimes make for big performances. The thriftily-financed **MONSTER'S BALL**, released in the final days of 2001, earned a Best Actress Academy Award for Halle Berry and its score, composed and performed by Asche & Spencer, proved one of the best soundtrack debuts in recent memory (Lions Gate Records 9608, \$17.99, 16 tracks, 49m 14s).

Like tomanandy and Hans Zimmer's Media Ventures, Asche & Spencer is not a musical group in the traditional sense, but an enterprise that represents a new synergy of film music and commercial sound design. Founded in 1988 by Minneapolis musicians Mark Asche and Thad Spencer (formerly of The Jayhawks), Asche & Spencer is foremost an agency that provides music and sounds for advertisements by the likes of Apple, MTV, Ikea, Miller Lite, and Porsche. Although Asche departed the firm several years ago (he now performs with The Senders), the Asche & Spencer name has carried on in the corporate world and in its first soundtrack.

The music for **MONSTER'S BALL** was composed by Spencer and performed by a small rock ensemble in a style that recalls the ambient atmospheres of Brian Eno and Michael



Brook. Mournful and elegant, its strength is its subtlety—a quality lacking in too many current scores; and the music is eminently listenable on its own. Spencer thoughtfully tracks the film's four folk/country songs, including one by The Jayhawks, at the close of the disc, which preserves the integrity of the score proper.

For more information, visit [www.monstersballthefilm.com](http://www.monstersballthefilm.com) or [www.ascheandspencer.com](http://www.ascheandspencer.com).

## Delia Derbyshire

The First Lady of Electronica, Delia Derbyshire, has been honored with a memorial website, [www.deliaderbyshire.com](http://www.deliaderbyshire.com), giving her name a fame in death that often escaped her in life. Born in Coventry, England, in 1937, Derbyshire took a degree in mathematics and music at Girton College, Cambridge, and joined the BBC in 1960 after Decca Records advised her that it did not employ women in its recording studios. At BBC's fledgling Radiophonic Workshop, she perfected her fascination with creating soundscapes from purely electronic sources, and within months produced her famous recording of Ron Grainer's DOCTOR WHO theme. (According to the website, Grainer was astounded. "Did I really write this?" he asked. "Most of it," Derbyshire replied.)

Derbyshire's talent and enthusiasm ushered in the "Golden Age" of the Workshop,





*Delia Derbyshire, First Lady of Electronica.*

but she remained effectively anonymous, with most of her recordings credited “special sound by BBC Radiophonic Workshop” (on other recordings, she adopted the pseudonym “Russe”). In time her musical pursuits extended into film, theater, and festivals, as well as encounters with the likes of Brian Jones, Paul McCartney, George Martin, Anthony Newley, Harry Nilsson, Pink Floyd, and Karlheinz Stockhausen. The website features, among its many wonders, downloadable mp3 files of a loungy demo recorded with Newley, a dreamy cue from **WORK IS A FOUR-LETTER WORD** (1968), and an electronic hymn from the original BBC play **THE PROPHET**.

Derbyshire also found success, again anonymously, as part of the electronic group White Noise, which she founded with David Vorhaus. Their only true LP, **AN ELECTRIC STORM**, offered a visionary blend of the medieval and electronica, and was one of Island Records’ early mainstays (Island 3DCID1001, England, approx. \$19.99, 8 tracks). Although acknowledged and revered by leading electronic music talents, “the unsung heroine of British electronic music,” who died in 2001, will be remembered most for her work on **DOCTOR WHO**.

**DOCTOR WHO AT THE BBC RADIOPHONIC WORKSHOP, VOLUME 1: THE EARLY YEARS 1963-1969** (BBC Legends WMSF60232, England, \$16.99, 27 tracks) features Derbyshire’s original recording of the **DOCTOR WHO** theme (realized

with valve oscillators, tape loops, and filters) along with three edited versions used during the 1960s and her production of “Chromophone Band.” **DOCTOR WHO AT THE BBC RADIOPHONIC WORKSHOP, VOLUME 2: NEW BEGINNINGS 1970-1980** (BBC Legends WMSF60242, England, \$16.99) includes later edits of Derbyshire’s version of the theme, including the 1973 45rpm single release (which marked the first time she was credited by name), as well as two of her finest recordings: “Blue Veils and Golden Sands” and “The Delian Mode.”

## *Name That Tune*

For lovers of film music, coming attractions often represent one of filmgoing’s frustrating experiences. Preview trailers are renowned for using music from sources other than the film itself—indeed, to judge by trailers alone, it sometimes seems that most new Hollywood productions are accompanied by the music from **THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS**, **THE THIN RED LINE**, **THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER**—and, of course, Carl Orff’s “Carmina Burana.” But every so often we hear music that is new, different, enticing... yet it is nowhere to be found in the final film.

Soundtrack.net now offers a searchable database of trailer music that—although not yet comprehensive—is easy to use, ever-expanding, and even identifies themes used in teaser trailers, TV spots, international releases, reissues, as well as home video, DVD, and internet trailers. Through its database, one can learn, for example, that the evocative choral theme accompanying the theatrical trailer for **ROMEO MUST DIE** was in fact taken from Craig Armstrong’s original score for **PLUNKETT & MACLEANE**, while the electronic rock theme in the alternate trailer was Gary Numan’s “Dark”—and the TV spot was accompanied by “Requiem Rave.” Soundtrack.net has also established a second database identifying all DVDs that feature isolated musical scores. The website is truly an innovative resource, limited only by its current focus on American films of the past decade.

*Review materials should be sent c/o One Eyed Dog, PO Box 27305, Washington DC 20038. The Audio Watchdog is on-line at [OnEyeDog@aol.com](mailto:OnEyeDog@aol.com).*





# THE LETTERBOX



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## AMICUS: THE EDITOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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My thanks to Richard Harland Smith for his generally flattering review of our book, *AMICUS: THE STUDIO THAT DRIPPED BLOOD* [VW 86:74]. Richard seemed, like many other readers, to be in some confusion over why I took an editorial credit here rather than claiming outright authorship. The fact is that I didn't write the thing! That distinction goes to journalist and DVD commentator Jonathan Sothcott, who also supplied most of the pictures. Though paid for his efforts, Jonathan was so unhappy with the way I altered some of his copy that he did an "Alan Smithee" (or is it "Thomas

Lee"?) on me and insisted that I remove both his name and all of his editorial acknowledgments.

Battling a tight deadline to finish the project, with no assistance from the author, I did the best I could. I would certainly have credited sources such as Mark A. Miller's book on Cushing and Lee had I known that Jonathan had, er, *borrowed* information from here! Similarly, regarding the mis-captioned Hessler still, I've never actually met Gordon Hessler, but Jonathan didn't manage to identify him for me during the early stills selection process (before he fell out of his pram, so to speak).

I did change quite a lot of the book, re-writing various bits. One thing I was very unhappy with, at first, was the way

the text was slanted toward Max J. Rosenberg being the hero of the day and Milton Subotsky nothing more than a mad movie nerd who wanted to ruin every script that came his way. My addition of some positive Subotsky material to balance things up was one of the reasons for Jonathan and I parting company.

Considering the pain of the birthing process, I'm generally quite pleased with the book. There are plenty of great color and B&W stills, and as the only published history of this underrated company, it will do

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*Letters! We get letters!  
And so does Jonathan Radcliffe  
in HARRY POTTER AND  
THE SORCERER'S STONE!*



very nicely until someone comes along and hopefully does it better!

By the way, our next book is *BEASTS IN THE CELLAR*, covering the history of Tigon, and this is a different proposition altogether: an exhaustive look at both the movies and the men behind them, and the boardroom machinations that finally destroyed the company. It represents some ten years of hard work by regular *DARK SIDE* contributor John Hamilton, and is a fascinating read. John even managed to interview 98-year-old Vernon Sewell! We're hoping to publish in March/April 2003 and of course will send you a copy for review.

**Allan Bryce**  
**Editor, THE DARK SIDE**  
**Cheam, Surrey, England**

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### **AMICUS: THE PLAINTIFF'S PERSPECTIVE**

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With great interest, I read Richard Harland Smith's book review of *AMICUS: THE STUDIO THAT DRIPPED BLOOD* [VW 86:74]. I wish to thank Mr. Smith for mentioning that the book's author appropriated without documentation reminiscences of actors and directors that first appeared in my book, *CHRISTOPHER LEE AND PETER CUSHING AND HORROR CINEMA: A FILMOGRAPHY OF THEIR 22 COLLABORATIONS* (McFarland, 1995). Portions of the interviews that I conducted with Peter Duffell, Vincent Price, Gordon Hessler, and Christopher Lee appear in *AMICUS*, and the author offers no documentation that they were the results of my work.

I was most amused where RHS pointed out that a photo

of director Gordon Hessler is identified as a "crew member." RHS writes of the book's editor, Allan Bryce, "One would think Bryce capable of recognizing someone he has interviewed personally." Bryce undoubtedly would have, had he ever interviewed Hessler. The Hessler quotes are, in fact, straight out of my book—and therein lies the problem.

In *FANGORIA* #199 (Jan. 2001), reviewer Steve Swires writes of *AMICUS: THE STUDIO THAT DRIPPED BLOOD*, "Unfortunately, [the book] ... is sabotaged by a fatal flaw: the frequently superficial text is tainted by a whopping 107 substantive factual errors, which will explode like mental land mines for any attentive readers who have actually seen these films. Among the easily avoidable mistakes are misspelled actors' names, misidentified directors, misattributed credits, transposed shooting and release dates, incorrect plot summaries and descriptions of scenes that bear no resemblance to the movies themselves. This surplus of slipshod scholarship severely compromises the anonymous author's credibility. In fact, the uncredited author of *AMICUS* is *DARK SIDE* [magazine] contributor Jonathan Sothcott, who removed his name because of 'creative differences' with editor Allan Bryce. Actually, writers Tom Johnson and Deborah Del Vecchio deserve a co-byline, since Sothcott brazenly appropriated large portions of their 1992 McFarland tome *PETER CUSHING: THE GENTLE MAN OF HORROR AND HIS 91 FILMS* without credit. Perhaps confusing wholesale pilferage with legitimate research, he has copied their *Amicus* plot summaries,

presented their observations as his own and lifted scores of their interview quotes without acknowledgment... As a reliable reference source... it's a shambles. A more qualified—and more honorable—author was clearly required to do proper justice to this worthy subject."

For his book *THE CULT FILMS OF CHRISTOPHER LEE*, Jonathan Sothcott looted my Lee/Cushing volume. He appropriated parts of interviews that I conducted, offering no chapter notes or documentation, which leaves the impression that he conducted the interviews himself. At least he acknowledged on page 278 that he had "consulted" my book, but he also wrote that "Mark himself was a great help throughout the writing of this book." That is a complete fabrication, one that I find embarrassing.

Other authors, such as Jonathan Rigby (*ENGLISH GOTHIC, CHRISTOPHER LEE: THE AUTHORIZED SCREEN HISTORY*), Paul Jensen (*THE MEN WHO MADE THE MONSTERS*), and David Miller (*THE PETER CUSHING COMPANION*), have used my book as a source in their recent books. They, however, have provided proper documentation and have used my book sparingly to supplement their own research and ideas. That is exactly what Jonathan Sothcott should have done.

**Mark A. Miller**  
**Columbus, OH**

*In the interest of giving all sides their due, we're told—by VW reader Dr. Robert J. Kiss—that a recently conducted interview with Jonathan Sothcott, touching on this matter, can be found at: [www.geocities.com/avalard/Hammer/interJS.html](http://www.geocities.com/avalard/Hammer/interJS.html).*



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## RASHOMON: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

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I thoroughly enjoyed Charlie Largent's article on **MULHOLLAND DR.** and **RASHOMON** [VW 85:27]. His style is as engaging as his subject, and makes me want to add a perspective on **RASHOMON**.

But first, minor points on **MULHOLLAND DR.**: Mr. Largent might have confused Betty's audition with Adam Keshner (which never occurs because Betty has to leave), with her audition opposite Chad Everett, which was arranged by her Aunt Ruth. On Keshner's set, the girl-group lipsynchs to Connie Stevens' "Sixteen Reasons Why I Love You." Linda Scott's "I've Told Every Little Star" is synched by the blonde dream Camilla, as arranged by the Cowboy ("She's the girl"). Keshner's film in the dream is "The Sylvia North Story"—which we later learn was the film where Diane met Camilla, who got the role instead of her. The director was Bob Brooker, who in the dream is the director of the Everett scene. It's easy to get confused, and the lack of chapter stops hardly helps. (So does Lynch really prefer viewers to FF through the whole film?)

Obvious **WIZARD OF OZ** connections: a dream recasting people she knows, Winkie's restaurant (played by a Denny's?), concept of a "man behind everything" (like the "man behind the curtain"), use of a little man (munchkin), old couple like Auntie Em and Uncle Henry. I even thought the homeless man behind Winkie's bore a strange resemblance to Margaret Hamilton! **WILD AT HEART** already demonstrated how today's generations unconsciously enact the cultural myths absorbed through TV and radio (**OZ**, Elvis).

I guess I'm a dissenting voice on the magnificent **RASHOMON**, and I admit I've only seen it once, but it seems to me Western critics flatter themselves by ambiguifying it. It has the structure of all mysteries where the detective questions suspects who tell their version in flashback. Then he explains at the end how and why they were all lying: X was having an affair, Y was embezzling, and Z committed the murder. By putting all their perspectives together, you arrive at the objective truth. But we don't usually elaborate an existential dilemma from a multiplicity of equally valid truths, etc. The only "twist" in **RASHOMON** is the striking fact that each witness claims responsibility for the crime. This is the great mystery which baffles the woodcutter, especially since he witnessed the event. His story is presented last as the most objective version, and the detective answers his bafflement pointedly by exposing the woodcutter's own self-serving lie. There's no fooling this guy! He's not shrugging his shoulders and saying "What is truth?" This doesn't leave us with the conclusion that the truth is unknowable. It tells us that in order to understand that truth, a compassionate insight into the human heart is necessary.

I'm sorry if this sounds mundane, but I rather think it sounds humane—and therefore more in keeping with Kurosawa's humanist *oeuvre* than trying to make him out a modernist or existentialist, which rather serves ourselves.

To quote Homer Simpson on **RASHOMON**, "That's not how I remember it."

**Michael Barrett**  
Universal City, TX

*Crediting the Linda Scott song  
in place of the Connie Stevens*

*one was my fault in editing the piece, Michael. Charlie's article offered a more generic description of the song, which I felt needed proper identification. I had the names of the song and artist correct, but it seems I misplaced them. Or did I?*

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## PUTTING FRANCO IN PERSPECTIVE

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I have been an avid reader of VW since the beginning, and will be there when you publish your final issue (hopefully, far, far into the future). When that Size-A envelope appears in the mailbox, I know I'm in for a few hours of enjoyment and enlightenment, month after month.

However, this bizarre fascination with Jess Franco is, quite frankly, bewildering. Is there anyone else out there, besides me, who thinks this guy is a no-talent hack? I've managed to sit through several of his higher profile products (I hesitate calling them "films" or even "movies") such as **TENDER FLESH, VAMPYROS LESBOS, SHE KILLED IN ECSTASY, LUST FOR FRANKENSTEIN, JACK THE RIPPER**, etc., and can barely make it through, let alone enjoy them. I can't, for the life of me, see how anyone can praise this guy and his product. Ed Wood is a hack. We know he is a hack, and we acknowledge this fact, but at least his films are charming in their innocent incompetence.

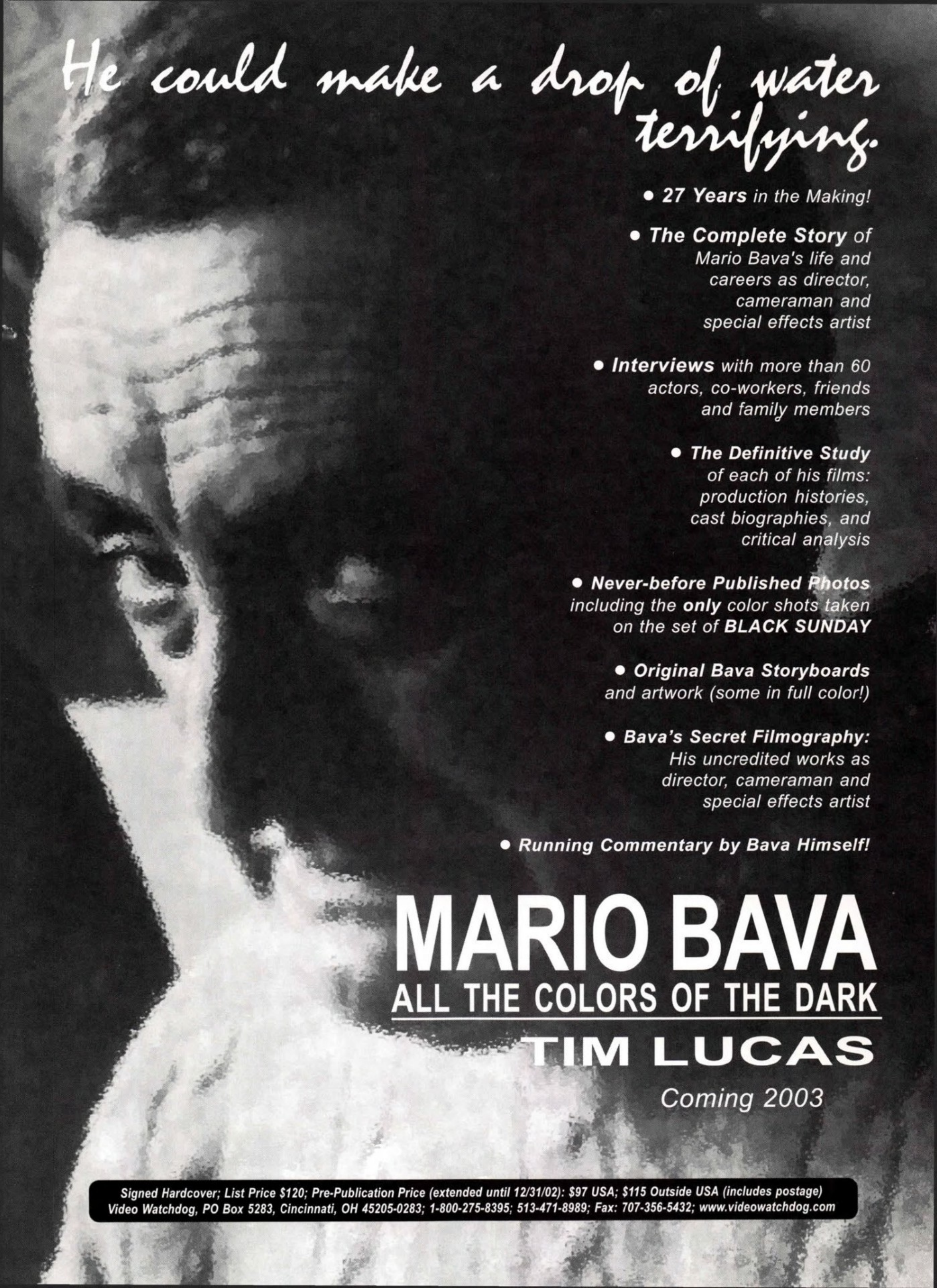
If a filmmaker's movies are so horrendously banal that one has to be given a primer on how to "read" his movies [VW 1:18], then it's time to call it like it is: This emperor has no clothes!

**Dave Alianiello**  
Reynoldsburg, OH

*Let's just say that, in some, he wears less than others...*







*He could make a drop of water  
terrifying.*

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# MARIO BAVA

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